Author:
Piper, Helen

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Questions of value and problems of critical judgement : British television drama serials, Autumn 1997 - Autumn 2000.

Questions of Value and Problems of Critical Judgement:

British Television Drama Serials, Autumn 1997 – Autumn 2000

Helen Piper

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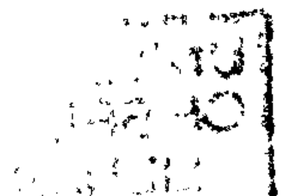

Abstract

This thesis offers an examination of contemporary British television drama and its cultural value at the end of the twentieth century, questioning our ability to ascribe merit. The study surveys emerging trends from a broad range of so-called 'quality' drama serials transmitted on British terrestrial television between October 1997 and October 2000, and uses this body of texts as an empirical context to explore broader questions of aesthetics and use-value. Relevant secondary discourses such as industrial debate, journalistic critique, and cultural theory are all interrogated. Arguments comprising a 'realist paradigm' are examined in some detail, as are certain critical positions commonly adopted towards 'costume' drama. In each case, modifications to established concepts are recommended so as better to reflect the public and other functions often served by mainstream television fictions. In particular, a paradigm of 'dramatic myth' is developed and offered as an alternative framework for analysis, and by extension, for critical evaluation.

Case study texts provide a locus for testing and modifying arguments throughout. For example, *Butterfly Collectors* (Granada 1999) epitomises a number of key trends; *Warriors* (BBC 1999) is used to demonstrate various positions on realism; and both *Vanity Fair* (BBC 1998) and *Our Mutual Friend* (BBC 1998) serve to elaborate the case (or predicament) of the literary adaptation. The final chapter is dedicated to the analysis of three contemporary dramas: *Nature Boy* (BBC 2000), *Births Marriages and Deaths* (BBC 1999) and *The Last Train* (Granada 1999). These analyses draw upon selected criteria associated with both realism and myth in order to arrive at a valorising critique that prioritises receiver use value. The argument is consistently made for extending the practice of criticism as a socio-cultural and pedagogic process, whilst remaining ever mindful of the problems of theory, scholarship, and power this might involve.

For Ava May,
whose arrival was so timely.

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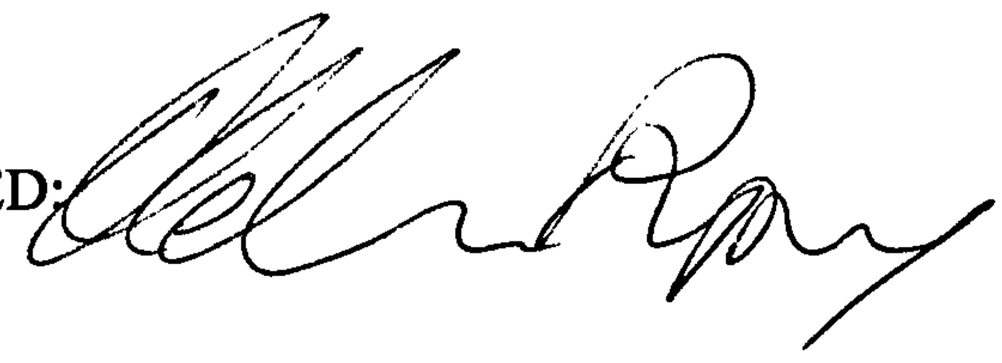
Author's declaration

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the Regulations of the University of Bristol. The work is original except where indicated by special reference in the text and no part of the dissertation has been submitted for any other degree.
Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author and in no way represent those of the University of Bristol.
The dissertation has not been presented to any other University for examination either in the United Kingdom or overseas.

SIGNED:  DATE: 27 January, 2002

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INTRODUCTION

A witty! Oh the bud of commendation

Fit for a girl of sixteen; I am blown, man,

I should be wise by this time .....[1]

The dog days of the twentieth century were far from interesting times for British television drama, or so, at least, the usual commentators would have it. In marked contrast to the excitements of new technology, few obvious artistic milestones were laid, and little in the way of fiction emerged to galvanise the nation or stir its collective conscience. There were no lost Cathys, no Yossers, and no questions asked in parliament, although the Prime Minister did, somewhat notoriously, offer to lend his support to the "Free Deirdre Campaign".[2] The youthful dynamic appeared always to be elsewhere, with the most recognisable innovations of style, form and audience address occurring in the emergent and rapidly evolving hybrid genres of factual entertainment, 'docu-soap', and later, in social experiments such as the excessively debated *Big Brother* (Bazal/Channel 4, 2000). By contrast, the drama serial seemed more and more like a portly baby-boomer, a blown radical whose energetic zeal had long since ebbed away.

True to form, broadsheet critics still managed to expend a fair amount of energy remarking upon the unremarkable nature of most dramas, or as Christopher Dunkley

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[1] Livia, *Women Beware Women,* Thomas Middleton, (Act 1, sc ii)

[2] During the period, *Coronation Street* ran a story in which Deirdre Rachid was falsely imprisoned, prompting a tongue-in-cheek public campaign for her release.

put it:

> If middle-of-the-road mid-evening middlebrow drama, mostly of middling length, is what you like from television – and most of us want it from time to time – then Britain is the place to be.[3]

Although Dunkley did not go on to describe his expectations nor elaborate his criteria of worth, he did suggest that things were not always so humdrum - which begs the question: 'how would we tell' (rather than 'whether or not') if things were ever thus? The existence of an incontrovertible 'golden age' is often contested, but how selectively do we recall other high spots, how accurate are our programme memories, and in so far as television has one, how representative is the canon? Moreover, what good are any of these yardsticks to us if we wish to explore present values for present-day audiences?

This project was designed to pursue and bring together different routes of enquiry. In the first place, I wanted to monitor new drama output in quite a rigorous and comprehensive fashion, not least so as to avoid that retrospective blur that can be used to substantiate arbitrary and usually negative generalisations. A second objective was to use this documented broadcast material as a very precise empirical context within which to ask some hoary old questions about artistic merit and cultural value. If British television drama has changed in its maturity, should or might our criteria not have done the same? One paradox, increasingly common in the 1990s, was that the

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[3] Christopher Dunkley, "Why drama isn't yet a crisis", *The Financial Times*, 12 May 1999, p 22.

terrestrial channels were all claiming high quality as a routine, consistent feature of their output. It was to test the validity of such claims that I decided to focus on texts that were either branded or assumed to be at the so-called 'quality' end of the peak-time middle-ground. Not only because this is the normative benchmark of new drama production, but because, as John Caughie has observed, there is also a need "to develop serious theoretical debates around the areas which television itself takes seriously" (1981: 11). In practice, this category translated into virtually every new, British made, multi-part, low volume, drama that was broadcast on the big four channels between say, 8pm and 11pm, save perhaps those that were very obviously targeted at niche markets. For reasons I shall return to, it was also important to examine dramas and the discourses around them *at the time of broadcast*[4] although circumscribing the empirical research in this way is clearly going entail a risk of future developments revealing my interpretations to be hopelessly rooted in the myopia of the current zeitgeist. I would argue that the period in question proved far from being an artistic desert, but even if Dunkley's verdict were correct, then an unexciting period should be as good as any to investigate the idea of mainstream *use-value*.

This exploration of value invited an interrogation of critical criteria, as well as the problematic relationship of criticism to television itself. After all, television drama is surely the most grudgingly acknowledged of all art forms: what other British cultural product could be happily described by its own institutional guardians as "the least worst in the world"?[5] By the end of the twentieth century, post-war bourgeois hostility to the medium – for example, as the "bastard child of film" - had yet to be

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[4] The period under investigation was therefore concurrent with the duration of the research, both of which ran from October 1997 to October 2000 inclusive.
[5] BFI newsletter, August 2000, 2.

eradicated by a supposedly 'celebratory' postmodernist embrace of popular culture. In fact, as others have observed, this has been so heavily qualified (and so heavily ironic) that in practice it has merely added a streetwise veneer to old prejudices. Television remains a bad habit, statistically proven to be used to an extent that is anecdotally denied. Most of us are guilty of publicly underestimating the amount that we watch, just as many are likely to exaggerate the frequency with which they visit an art gallery. If pressed, even arch opponents will admit that there are *some* good programmes, but these rarely figure in generalised characterisations – instead they are regarded as the exceptions, the accidental by-products of an industrial system that as we all now well know, is geared to social 'manipulation' and profit.

In this perceptual context, the new technology and proliferation of digital channels at the end of the century was to throw up as many new anxieties as opportunities. In comparison to previous innovations (such as the introduction of colour or VCRs) British take-up of cable and satellite had been relatively slow, as analysis conducted for the RTS revealed: "Multichannel services, for all their trumpeting about freedom to choose and boundless variety, have undershot even Teletext".[6] Like a nation of weight-watchers presented with a banquet, many expressed fears of being overwhelmed by plenty, and of being unable to trust themselves in the face of so many opportunities to view. All of which bespoke a lack of critical confidence that is not altogether surprising, given the British legacy of both critical contempt and broadcaster paternalism. Stepping into the breach to be left by the demise of the fixed menu, industry analysts predicted an imminent explosion in navigational aids and pre-

[6] William Phillips, "Tales of take up", *Television*, July 1999, 24 – 5. By 1999, cable/satellite and new digital channels had amassed 14% of the total television audience (source: BARB).

selection services. The rhetoric of viewer empowerment looked to be superseded by that of 'trust', and broadcasters (like everyone else) became ever more obsessed by 'brand building'. As a BBC Marketing executive noted wryly: "We may not have BBC television in the future, but we will have BBC holograms."[7] Yet as I shall contend, the consumerist imperative to be selective is but one reason for resurrecting questions of value. If we accept the need to make judgements (or cause them to be made for us) then we have to address the various aesthetic or other ideologies on which evaluation can be founded, and this means that we first have to unravel the legacy of historic prejudice.

I am particularly sensitive to the need for a provisional way through the interminable problems of actually forming judgements, precisely because this project was first conceived within the vacuum they have left. In fact I spent much of the early/mid 1990s in various BBC commissioning or policy meetings. These were often fraught, quasi-Machiavellian encounters during which the resilient took care to associate themselves with success (and distance themselves from failure), and where well-meaning liberals were soon reminded that thought can be the enemy of decision making. The dilemmas would all be familiar to industry executives: whether or not to go ahead with a project, to renew a serial, to release a video; how best to justify ratings failure (or disguise success) as 'public service'; how to legitimate aesthetic choices (or even make them), particularly when all about you had lost their heads and your own judgement was in question. Without other benchmarks to cling to, market exigencies soon become disproportionately important, but these were all dilemmas on which a less reluctant Academy *could* have had an influence. Indeed it almost

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[7] Jane Frost, quoted by Hilary Curtis in "Brand aid", *The Guardian* (Media), 1 Nov 1999, 10/11.

certainly would have, had it only appeared to have anything accessible to offer: tellingly, the otherwise well-stocked BBC library does not even subscribe to *Screen*. The Academy itself is now under threat to make itself more 'useful' but not, as one might reasonably hope, because of the way it has foreclosed questions that still preoccupy those who watch and make television, but because it must now produce graduates useful to industry. Wholly in keeping with the management ethos of the 1990s, television studies is expected to legitimate itself by becoming more vocational, and giving students the skills they will need for media careers. All of which fails to recognise that education serves broader social needs than the requirements of industry, and once again obviates value critique at the altar of the market. I shall make a more detailed case for criticism in chapter two, and this will be based on the conviction that it is the very process of discussion, debate and contestation that helps us to 'own' a national cultural practice that is otherwise only 'supplied'.

I am assured it is not compulsory for theses to supply neat solutions to all the problems they raise, and the period selected and texts chosen should make for a sufficiently interesting subject in its own right. But the persistent difficulty in acknowledging the various qualities of these texts required that I at least grappled towards a pragmatic response to otherwise unanswerable questions. What follows is the product of a search process not a crusade, for there was no *a priori* commitment to a single theoretical model, ideology or methodology. In chapter one I attempt to lay out the ground, by documenting some of the key trends of form, character, time and space that if not exclusive to the serials of the period, were certainly characteristic of them. Chapter two is primarily an examination of the discourses that surround texts: the various arguments raised (and not raised) in debates about quality, relevant

theories about audiences and society, the imperative .

the aesthetic legacy that dogs its progress. I take a strand of this further in chapter three, by attempting to unravel and challenge the dichotomy of realism/anti-realism – possibly the most influential critical paradigm and the one that has determined the shape of much television scholarship. Chapters two and three have been ordered in this way so as to do full justice to the complexity of the problems that beset value judgement before attempting to move forward. Chapter four is a pragmatic move to do the latter, by proposing an alternative set of possible values in the functional prototype of myth. This is intended as a supplementary, not a replacement, paradigm for criticism and will inform rather than circumscribe my later case analyses in chapters five and six. Chapter five is dedicated to re-assessing arguments that are commonly levelled against costume drama, and concludes with a detailed study of two serials: *Vanity Fair* and *Our Mutual Friend*. Chapter Six is an exploration of three other, non-period serials, and deploys some of the value criteria associated with both dramatic myth and realism to evaluate *Nature Boy, The Last Train*, and *Births, Marriages and Deaths*. It is followed by a short summary of the principle deductions drawn throughout.

The analyses are a pertinent sample of the nearly 150 serials[8] that comprised the research subject and are best read in the light of the preceding discussions. Whereas my more general observations were deduced from all serials viewed, these particular examples were selected to show a range of aesthetic strategies and also because each demonstrates some of the particular and somewhat neglected use-values explored in

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[8] All serials were broadcast on the four main terrestrial networks and are listed in Appendix A.

chapter four. As such they are neither typical nor necessarily representative, although the omission of any channel 4 serial is really the result of a low volume of originations on that channel during the period. I would stress again that the model of dramatic myth is a contingent one, a synthesis of many pre-existing ideas as a pragmatic response to both the difficulties encountered and what the body of broadcast material itself seems to demand. It suggests possibilities for practical criticism, and is by no means intended as a rigid methodology nor a simple antidote to all the complex problems illustrated in chapters two and three.

Finally, I should perhaps defend my decision to look at texts rather than 'flows', and to sometimes draw parallels between contemporary television drama and the performed narratives and drama of materially distinct media and historically different eras, such as the Elizabethan stage. It is not my intention to de-historicise or to essay a neo-canonisation of the dramatic work: temporal specificity, endemic intertextuality and hybridity are crucial to understanding contemporary television, so I would (and repeatedly do) acknowledge these factors. However, television is not just about information mediation or spectacularised images: it is also now the primary producer and purveyor of *drama*: a highly specialised form for the performative enactment of possible conflicts and confrontations. As A. D. Nuttall recently lamented in post-Wittgenstein frustration, Greek tragedy might not be the same thing as Elizabethan:

> But we misuse our intelligence if we *always* look for difference and never for similarity ... The terminus of such analysis is always a universe of windowless, monadic individuals, linguistically

> unassimilable, in which as Bishop Butler put it "Everything is what it is and not another thing." (Nuttall 1996: 81/2)

If looking for points of connection there is of course much to be said for say, casting a lateral eye across television genres rather than across media, but not necessarily to the exclusion of other comparative criteria. Certainly there seems little to be gained from wilfully ignoring the evident continuities and trans-cultural influences within a strong tradition of *play*. A relatively modest enquiry as to what might have been good *about* some British television dramas in the late twentieth century may depend in turn upon reaching or assuming some sort of a position with respect to other, completely unwieldy questions such as 'what makes for good drama', as well as 'what makes for good television', 'for whom', and 'why'. However, these beg the sort of answers that will always lurk just beyond the reach of this project, not least because speculating how we can even address them will prove to be no small or preliminary venture.

CHAPTER ONE

A Very Public Practice:

Trends in television drama at the end of the 1990s

Critics of television like to caricature the medium as a distraction from other more cerebral or reflective pursuits, presuming that if we did not always have this box of temptation we would happily fill the idle hours in other ways. When the day of abstinence comes, perhaps we will even have time to speculate as to what future generations will make of all those 'typical TV programmes' that were put into sealed Millennium capsules for their historical enlightenment. We could freely fantasise about an alien deciphering *Father Ted* (with all the baffled ardour of a Classics scholar), or imagine twenty-fifth century students as they pore over *Eastenders* and hypothesise regarding its lost (presumed perished) denouement. All of which might be no more edifying but just as conclusive as watching such texts daily and deciding what they mean to us in the here and now. With or without opportunities for reflection, the exact manner in which creative programming evolves, and the uses and values it can represent, can become vexed questions without the benefit of hindsight. Yet this, in a way, is precisely the point – we have become well-practised both at rehabilitating forgotten texts and re-assessing those that have been historically under-appreciated. Perhaps now we most need to find ways of extrapolating *transient* significance and acknowledging immediate and present values.

Shining as a (dubious) example for such a project, there is of course a whole marketing consultant sub-industry engaged in the prediction (or speedy analysis) of

cultural trends. Such ventures have proved lucrative despite producing findings that often seem as if they should have been rather obvious all along. In this chapter I shall attempt a similar 'sleight of hand', although to rather different ends. The intention here is to extrapolate and try to understand what lies behind some key trends in terrestrial drama programming during the three years from Autumn 1997 to Autumn 2000. The idea is tentatively to place these trends in an historical, artistic context so as to give an overview - a sort of textual relief map - that might provide a context for the discursive and critical analyses to follow.

1.1 The Late 1990s: Forms, Formats and Special Events

In the next chapter I will be dealing with some of the other circumstantial pressures on British television commissioners and schedulers, but suffice it here to say that competition imperatives intensified quite substantially during the 1990s. Unlike current affairs programming, drama as a genre looked to be reasonably secure in the brave new market. Even without the ratings success conferred by the early evening soaps, drama series and serials (particularly those that were 'up-market' or 'quality') often provided the bedrock of the peak-time schedule. Yet the ratings successes belied the degree to which new market forces had exacerbated tensions between production and broadcast criteria, and the established traditions and working practices of British television were increasingly under attack as a hindrance rather than a source of strength. Both the single play and the 'series of six', each delivered by a single writer, count among these perceived 'restrictions'. Commissioners were demanding increased volume: partly for financial reasons as six episodes or less can be difficult to sell to overseas broadcasters with 'stripped schedules', and partly

because once a series achieves the approval of a domestic peak-time audience the incentive, quite obviously, is to maximise this by extending the run.

Yet for all the talk of introducing American-style 'team writing', most British dramas and sitcoms still remain creatively dependant on a single writer, and few writers can deliver more than six episodes per season. Some long-running series such as *Peak Practice* (Central 1993 -) have been successfully handed over by their original creator (in this case, Lucy Gannon), and the year 2000 saw the arrival of the first 24 episode run of *Heartbeat* (Yorkshire 1992 -). Yet there were many more disappointments for schedulers: successful serials that closed without narrative possibilities for renewal, returning series that reached the end of their useful life, as well as others that writers could not or would not hand over (and/or simply did not want to write any more). Some that were stretched to another run often proved disappointing viewing. For example, *The Lakes* (BBC 1997-) seemed to lack coherency and direction - and shed a significant number of viewers - once the intensive contribution of its creator, Jimmy McGovern, was withdrawn from its second series. When broadcasters were finally forced to call it a day (for example after Colin Dexter killed off Inspector Morse in *The Remorseful Day*) they often did so amid a fanfare of self-celebration, maximum secondary exploitation, and an eye to future repeats.[1]

Adding to the uneasy mix of demand and limitation, was a new, and apparently contradictory, requirement for quality-encoded, special-event drama: what North

[1] Both Morse and the BBC's Victor Meldrew (*One Foot In The Grave*) finally met their end in the same week in November 2000, occasioning the transmission of a number of inside specials and features about the characters themselves.

Americans like to call "appointment television".[2] I say 'new' but in some respects this ideal of 'significant' television is a nostalgic attempt to restore the idea of television as a shared, national experience in which drama plays a central role, a notion that had been taken for granted before the grand new multi-channel era of choice. As Caughie's account of early television drama clearly illustrates, for most people in Britain during the 1950s and 1960s television was not necessarily a private experience for the simple reason that not everyone had a set, and so viewing opportunities were pooled. It thus developed a sense of event, of special occasion that was replicated in the organised flows and schedules of subsequent eras, and in which drama presented a consistently strong presence, "a distinct event cut out of the everyday flow of television" (Caughie 1991a: 27). The arrival of the digital age has prompted broadcasters actively to try and regenerate the sort of conversations about 'last night's telly' that seemed once to have needed little institutional encouragement. In practice, as MacMurraugh-Kavanagh illustrates in her analysis of 'The Wednesday Play', the impact of even seminal texts had effectively been orchestrated by the BBC which in 1965 had:

> set about converting *Up The Junction* into a talking-point by organizing a discussion of the issues it raised on BBC 2's *Late Night Line-Up* and BBC Radio Home Service's *The Critics*, both aired following transmission. On television, the play had now been sandwiched between a news bulletin and a topical debate, thus constructing an instant network of dialogue and an unmistakeable flow of meaning. (1997: 253)

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[2] Steve Tao (then of ABC TV) quoted in Tad Friend, "Creative Differences", *The New Yorker*, 6 Sep 1999, 59.

By the 1990s, the systematic drive to encourage 'synergetic' programming around key dramas was almost routine. There were *Omnibus* specials about Becky Sharp and Mrs Gaskell during the runs of *Vanity Fair* (BBC 1998) and *Wives and Daughters* (BBC 1999), and a cluster of documentaries and current affairs talk-shows about Bosnia after the transmission of *Warriors* in 1999 (see chapters three and four). One-off presentations dealing with matters of topical social concern were almost always followed by a studio debate, as was *Care* (BBC 2000) a single dramatisation of recent child abuse scandals in Welsh care homes. In other cases intervention was co-ordinated with more obvious marketing and presentation activity both on and off-screen: for example, there were promotional campaigns for *Eastenders* ("Everyone's talking about it") that resembled those for magazine and chat shows like *Live and Kicking* ("Miss It, Miss Out"). Additionally, there was of course a whole public relations-driven magazine industry devoted to secondary discourses about on-going serials and celebrities, such as *Inside Soap, Hello* and *OK.*

This drive to make television continue to *matter* led to some strategies that might otherwise seem paradoxical: for example, at the very same time as new cable channels were beginning to champion stripped schedules (with a series playing at the same time each day), the terrestrial stations were continually having to rethink the viability of long-established slots (such as sitcom at eight-thirty). The hysterical shenanigans surrounding ITV's decision to move *News at Ten* to eleven, and the BBC's later move of *The Nine O'Clock News* to ten, were just the most highly publicised, logical outcomes to this rethink. Amongst other things, the resulting furore marks the point at which the broadcasters' longstanding panic over the prospect of digital globalisation finally tipped over into the public, or rather the political, domain. Two hybrid drama forms thrived amid the scheduling experiments:

the "hybrid serialized series" (Brunsdon 1998: 237) and the mini-serial, broadcast over two nights. The former proved itself ideally suited to 'precinct dramas' as it provides a means of marrying up routine episodic stories with continuing story-lines about inter-personal relationships (amongst the force in say *The Bill* or *City Central*, or the medical team in *Casualty* and the like). The mini-serial category would include texts as diverse as *Great Expectations, Bravo Two Zero*, *Trust* and *Warriors*[3] and its particular manifestation in the 1990s was really a fusion of the single play with (a truncated version of) the traditionally four or six part drama serial. Broadcasters were beginning to suspect that the latter demanded too great a commitment of time, or an investment of concentration, from its audience. Editorially however, these two-parters seemed to have little in common with the glossy bestseller tradition of the American mini-series. Some British mini-serials were also renewed for a return visit, perhaps bringing them a step closer to the episodic series. The year 2000 brought the fourth incarnation of *Trial and Retribution* (Yorkshire/La Plante 1997-), making it an annual event. Similarly, the notoriously expensive *Hornblower* was made as four 'singles' and broadcast at key, usually holiday, weekends in 1998 and 1999. Clearly this sort of branding exercise was an inventive way of reconciling volume limitations (imposed by cost and/or authorship) with demands for familiarity, and so still growing the audience for what might once have been made either as a straightforward series or one-off single drama.

A two-parter that looked, at least initially, as if it might be testing the waters for a longer run was *Butterfly Collectors* (Granada 1999). Broadcast in April across

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[3] see Appendix 1 for a list of other first run, home-grown drama series, serials, and mini-serials broadcast between Autumn 1997 to Autumn 2000. There were 29 new two or three-parters broadcast during this period.

consecutive nights, it was heavily trailed as coming variously "from the writer of *Cracker*" and/or "of *Taggart*", and starring Oscar-winning Pete Postlethwaite, all of which positioned it quite firmly in a particular quality detective tradition. It is an exemplary rather than a 'typical' text, but its mini-serial quality status perfectly crystallises that schizophrenic mix of routine and special event that marks much recent mainstream television drama. I would like to use it as a locus for exploring broader trends of characterisation and space in dramas of the period, although I shall be concentrating for the most part on the public dimension of these attributes. Amongst my concerns throughout this project will be an interrogation of both the collective value of drama and its representation of a public realm, and so to consider its *culturally expressive* potential - not least in articulating what Raymond Williams famously described as a societal "structure of feeling".

1:2 *Butterfly Collectors*

> Kevin Prior was a murky little shit who got topped by another murky little shit. No, he didn't deserve to die, but yes that's how people like Prior do die.....We chase round like blue-arsed flies, and we come up with absolutely nothing, and then a year down the line we might, I say *might*, just make some sense, out of somebody. And the reason Frank, will be *that small*. It won't be a motive Frank, it'll be that small. And quite frankly Frank I can't be arsed waiting for it.
>
> Inspector John McKeown
>
> *Butterfly Collectors*

It is common enough for crime mysteries to begin with a murder, but it took a 1990s detective to declare it not even worth the effort of solving. Cynicism may have long been a prerequisite for the television cop but McKeown was a protagonist in a class of his own. Approaching fifty, passed over for promotion yet denied early retirement, he quite simply no longer wants a 'public' role: in fact, he seems to have lost all faith in law enforcement as a basic societal duty. By his own standards a Prozac-popping failure, and weighed down by a lethargy that appeared symptomatic of creeping moral corrosion, McKeown was perhaps the perfect embodiment of *fin-de-siècle* ideological exhaustion, as well as being a particularly unstable emissary to the public realm.

I have selected a detective mini-serial simply to reflect the continued predominance of crime drama throughout the period. According to some theorists, the popularity of crime fiction can be explained by its appeal to primal fears of transgression and to the subsequent narrative 'consolations' of retribution. It has been described as a 'fundamental genre of story-telling', and for similar reasons, has been credited with superior ideologising powers.[4] As Charlotte Brunsdon has argued, in its post 1970s manifestations, television crime has to be understood alongside an increasingly punitive law and order discourse which "occupies, and contributes to, a Manichean universe in which guilt, innocence and blame can be clearly attributed." (Brunsdon, 1998: 226). Similarly, Richard Sparks notes the centrality to the form of the *doxic,* which is 'all that goes without saying' - a consensual accord that is imperilled by the lack of unanimity prevalent in advanced and heterogeneous societies:

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[4] For a useful summary of these arguments see Sparks (1992: chapter 2)

> .... If elements of doxa survive in differentiated societies then television is likely to be one of the spheres in which they reside .... It may be that the doxicity which persists in television narrative acts as a kind of consolation against anxiety and dread. (Sparks 1992: 51)

By extension then, it is possible to argue that in the face of crumbling political meta-narratives and societal ideals, the intense popularity of detective fiction over the last ten or so years depends upon its continued provision of a last ethical bastion, a clear system of public order. Yet the turn of the century also saw a wave of ambiguity, with serials such as *The Cops* (BBC/World 1998-), and *Tough Love* (Granada 2000) actively presuming an endemic loss of confidence in police integrity. McKeown's opening polemic implies a correlative loss of faith in 'the public' itself, for if we should finally admit that the Kevin Priors of this world are no longer worthy of public or official retribution, then the question must be posed: who is? Moreover, is it a case of 'tired of crime, tired of (public) life', and if so to whom, if not the detective, might the viewer then turn to slay the metaphoric dragons of a very contemporary malaise? Brunsdon's analysis of three series from the late 1980s/early 1990s uncovers widespread scepticism about policing and the criminal justice system during these years, and raises explicit questions about the socially expressive powers and limitations of particular genres at particular times. She suggests that by the end of the decade, the specific 'structure of anxiety' underpinning crime fiction had begun to mutate into "a spectacularization of the body and site of crime". (Brunsdon 1998: 242) This, she implies, is contributing to the emergence of the medical drama (and medical-ised variants of detective drama) as the more dynamic genres of this later period.

It is a plausible enough hypothesis and there is no doubting the tremendous popularity of long running series such as *Casualty* and the American import *E.R.* at this time. Moreover, new and returning serials such as *Always and Everyone* (Granada, 1999 -), and *Holby City* (BBC, 1998 -) were being developed to maximise a visibly growing taste. There were also some interesting interventions in the genre, with series such as *Psychos* (Channel 4, 1999) which amongst other themes, explored the question of socially constructed notions of insanity, and *Life Support* (BBC 1999) which used the episodic format to explicitly frame particular ethical dilemmas whilst sustaining an on-going narrative of the doctors' private lives. Yet, (despite McKeown's initial ennui) there is no corresponding evidence to suggest that having reached saturation point, the detective genre was exhausted or in terminal decline at the end of the decade. Indeed, Brunsdon herself is rather hesitant about suggesting "was it then cops and now docs?" (1999: 232). What is particularly interesting about crime drama in the late 1990s is ingenuity in resolving its own generic contradictions, and in actually adapting to accommodate moral relativism. Similarly, many legal dramas such as *Fish* (Principal Pictures/BBC 2000) and *North Square* (Company TV/Channel 4 2000) tended not to revolve around the discovery or pursuit of the truth (as an absolute), often proposing instead a concept of fairness and justice as contingent and endlessly debatable. In addition to illustrating these intellectual shifts, *Butterfly Collectors* will also provide a good example of other key preoccupations that repeatedly cut across different genres of the period, namely: personal/social conflict, communities, professional heroes and public spaces.

The drama provides a relatively linear, intense, monologic narrative in which a convoluted scenario is apparently elucidated, only to be re-complicated and then finally unravelled towards the end of the two, ninety minute episodes. Dex Lister is

an early suspect but proven innocent of Prior's murder, although he and Billy Johnson do confess to discovering the body during a burglary at the victim's yard later that night. The Prior murder investigation becomes something of a personal odyssey for Inspector John McKeown, who is intrigued by the youth he arrested. Gradually they build up a strong relationship despite the complications of his job and the hostility of Dex's community. Alongside the weary murder investigation, John also pieces together information about the Lister family: Dex is only seventeen yet on his wages as a public gardener, seems to be bringing up his much younger sister (Sally) and brother (Mark) single-handedly, as well as devotedly tending their own, delightful back garden. His father was a known drunk and wife/child abuser and died falling from a roof where he was working as a tiler with Dex's assistance. The mother meanwhile, is missing, allegedly in Blackpool, presumed to be working as a prostitute.

The more John knows, the less the story of Dex' private life seems to add up, and the first episode ends when he confronts the lad with his growing suspicion that he murdered his own father. Quite obviously, Mr Lister was no less 'a shit' than Kevin Prior or any of the others on the local estate but McKeown is suddenly energised by the possibility that Dex has taken him "for a complete mug": accepting his advice, friendship and even allowing him to privately pay the fees of Rachel, his lawyer. He is also experiencing a long-forgotten sense of moral outrage that someone like Dex could commit such a crime and this is made explicit when he shouts to his own partner Sandra, that the lad is not "what he says he is". Their relationship undergoes major shifts in episode two: John arrests Dex, and later lashes out whilst interrogating him, leading to his own suspension on grounds of assault. He seems to be approaching emotional breakdown and one night drunkenly attacks the Lister's house

and garden, and is charged with drunken driving. Although facing a court case and a threatened injunction John still remains driven to uncover the truth. Eventually, the penny drops, and after a tense chase he obliges Dex to admit that it is ten year old Mark who had been running cocaine dealing errands for Prior, and Mark who had accidentally murdered him after a scuffle. All of Dex' subterfuge had been in protection of the child.

Fittingly and expediently, the resolution of such a morally ambivalent set of crimes and victims is symbolic and personal rather than official. John has to attend court on the charge of assault but he knows he cannot justify defending himself with the truth if it is at the expense of Mark and Dex. However, when called to give evidence, Dex deliberately discredits his own story. Later, although barred from contact with the Listers, John and Sandra visit at Dex' invitation, and they all watch Mark ceremonially burn the money he had stolen from Prior's office. John agrees to restore the beloved garden to its former state, and the friendship between these very post-nuclear families, takes a new and faltering step forward.

I have summarised the plot partly to give an indication of how the mini-serial format is able to marry the suspenseful linear, causal, progression of the investigative single drama, with the temporal luxury of twists, turns and sustained character exposition that continuing serial narratives are more suited to provide. Further, I wanted to illustrate that the primary crime story of transgression and retribution is paralleled by, indeed is subordinate to, the disruption/crisis/resolution pattern of the two men's personal relationship. Because this form of displacement perfectly epitomises the narrative strategy of any number of texts produced during the period, it will warrant further investigation.

1: 3 Character and Individualism

It is long received industry wisdom that television drama tends towards the inverse of Aristotelian priorities: that character, not action, is perceived as its "lifeblood":

> Over and over again, when I asked executives which factors weighed most heavily in putting shows on the air, keeping them there, shaping their content, I heard a standardized list. At the top, the appeal of actors and characters. (Gitlin 1985: 25 –6)

Similarly, it is widely accepted by theorists that televisual styles and modes of address actively work to foreground character and the contemplation of personality. As Sarah Kozloff has noted, various narrative attributes work to "displace audience interest from the syntagmatic axis to the paradigmatic - that is, from the flow of events per se to the revelation and development of existents." So much so in fact that the need to maintain several stories at once has meant that "television has taken parallel montage to a high art". (Kozloff, 1992: 75 & 85).

There is a crucial value interpretation of these apparently neutral observations, not least because of various (traditional and Marxist) aesthetic prejudices towards character (and performance) –driven art forms. I will be looking more closely at these later, but here I think it is important to distinguish the deployment of character in television drama, from the various conceptual senses of 'the individual' with which it is often bound up. There is for example, a common-sense logic which routinely establishes that, as television is oriented towards the contemplation of people, it is

ergo a fundamentally *individuating* medium. By a rather roundabout route, the classical dichotomy of character versus plot is frequently mapped on to the critical opposition between the individual and society: a marriage that a whole range of essentialisms about television might be mobilised to support. For example, in the rare flurry of orthodox aesthetic critique occasioned by the BBC's attempts to televise Shakespeare, the logic that television's "proper style is generally described as naturalistic and even domestic" (Willems 1987) - so making Jonathan Miller feel "obliged to present the thing as naturally as you can"[5] - was repeated so often it became near axiomatic. The intimate naturalism of character-driven television was widely seen to privilege only the most private and particular of themes. Televising Shakespeare was, therefore, a doomed venture, because according to Zitner what the Elizabethan theatre

> provided most often was humanity seen not in the all-defining close-up of psychology or at the far and narrowed distance of social relation. Shakespeare's is a relational not an essentializing or ideologizing stage; not a stage pre-empted by convictions that must focus on one causal chain, psychological or sociological, but a stage closer to the tenor of encountered experience in which causes and motives of all sorts jostle. (Zitner 1988: 38)

Typically also, a recent feature in the *Guardian* endorsed the call for a more radical, issue-driven television drama culture, and asserted with a rhetorical flourish:

> In the mainstream, television drama today focuses on one thing – individuals. Margaret Thatcher thought we should all live in a world

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[5] Quoted in Hallinan T (1981) 134 – 145.

> of competing people and the Labour government never knew how to tackle that change. It was a defining moment, and the culture bled through to television. Television no longer does issues based on individuals. It does love based on individuals.[6]

Quite aside from the evident futility of singling out 'television drama culture' to blame for a political and societal problem (that has presumably had an equivalent impact on theatre, film and literature), there are multiple difficulties with all the above critical positions, not least that Zitner's eloquent description of the Shakespearean stage also serves as a fairly accurate characterisation of many recent television serials. First and foremost though, arguments of this type still derive much of their pejorative force from the discredited romanticisation of the individual as 'unique'. Hence the implication of a range of characters quite specific to themselves, whose situation does little to elucidate historical forces at work, and can offer audiences little in the way of *shareable* value. This train of thought works specifically to undermine the possibility that a televisual *dramatis personae* may have different levels of meaning, microcosmic or otherwise: a possibility that is of course widely recognised of drama in less critically derided media. After all, few denounce *Hamlet* for being 'revenge based on an individual' yet that is, in fact, precisely what distinguished Elizabethan tragedy from its classical predecessors. Auerbach explains the transition not just as the advent of a more individualised conception of destiny, but in terms of the freedom of movement, "invention, presentation which distinguish the Elizabethan and the modern drama generally" (1968:319). There are numerous reasons why the negative charge of individuation is levied at television in particular,

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[6] Kamal Ahmed, "Causing A Scene", *The Guardian (Weekend)*, Nov 27 1999, 26

not least its discursive style, small screen and domestic mode of reception: as if these features alone would account for an audience failure to grasp a 'bigger picture'. As I will argue when I revisit questions of agency and society in chapter three, the various characteristics and conventions of television do not necessarily work against the portrayal of an individual character as emblematic, representative, 'free to act' or confined by socio-economic structures.

In any event, the charge against idiosyncratic personality sits somewhat uneasily with the recognition that popular characters only make sense if understood within the broader and highly complex ideologies of their period.

> By virtue of the fact that [a series] must rally a mass, trans-class, trans-gender audience around a positive project – at once economic and ideological – which is neither reducible to, nor explicitly against, dominant class interests, the series cannot be seen in monolithic terms as the 'perfect' expression of a dominant ideology ... Series are not only commercially vulnerable but also ideologically vulnerable as previously convincing strategies and resolutions fall apart under the weight of their own internal tensions or are unable to resolve new anxieties of the viewing public. (Buxton 1990: 17)

Similar claims have been made in respect of melodrama, which according to Feuer (1984: 4-18) also opens up spaces and lays bare social contradictions, that it only notionally or temporarily resolves. Buxton develops a fairly eclectic analytical methodology which, amongst other theories, accommodates Pierre Macherey's suggestion that analysis be concentrated at the level of *assemblage*. The point is that far from being arbitrary, this constitutes a very carefully selected group of *actants* and

their material conditions, possessions and so on which reflect various social and ideological forces. It is often the tension between these elements which reveals the flaws in the ideological strategy of a series, and how it relates to its time. Buxton's own analysis of the American episodic series *Miami Vice* emphasises that weekly stories repeatedly came up against contradictions inherent to their own Reaganite strategy and representative cast, such as the competing claims that whereas crime is a moral issue, conspicuous consumption is not. The series was frequently only able to accommodate these inconsistencies by "a self conscious use of style to refuse narrative", thus making it "undoubtedly the most ambiguous series of all time". (1990:158)

By contrast, the distinctively late 1990s dilemma was perhaps less about trying to present a flawed ideology than it was inhibited about positing one at all. Quite possibly, this is also why contemporary television has been so often accused of individuating in a different sense: that it now dwells only on considerations of a strictly personal or intimate nature. There is some truth in this observation - as the recent preponderance of narratives dealing with sexual relationships would suggest – although it is equally possible to find texts to support the position that popular drama consistently *reifies* the emotive, moral principle of the 'common weal'. The point really is that it is often unable to put political flesh onto this ideal. It is precisely because television was at the cultural centre of a late century 'crisis of values' - a far wider ideological vacuum and a newly cautious, pragmatic mood - that ideological resolutions have become so problematic. It is the imaginative re-negotiation of such functions that actually makes so many of the texts of the period particularly interesting.

The example of *Butterfly Collectors* seems to suggest that only by displacing conflicts on to localised, inter-personal ideals (such as fidelity, kindness and generosity) can societal ethics any longer be legitimated by contemporary drama. McKeown is quite literally obliged to dispense judgement himself. These inter-personal conflicts are not necessarily an evasion of social themes but a microcosmic playing out of conflicts within broader communities, *and* a reflection of the conceptual problems faced by the attempt to narrativise this wider social sphere. In an analogous sense, television fiction may provide one of the few remaining discursive territories whereby a Durkheimian concept of society (as an entity more than the sum of its parts) is still even tenable, and the viability of a "conscience collective" is still presented as an empirical reality. More literally and specifically, what are the rape trials, racist attacks or, in the case of *Butterfly Collectors*, poverty, child-abuse, murder and drug-trading if they are not 'issues'? Undeniably, these are the relentlessly routine stuff of soaps, episodic series and serials alike.

Yet it is true that *Butterfly Collectors* ultimately presents a low-key humble victory for inter-personal morality above policy or institutional expediency. Its denouement is a triumph for the inter-subjective support of partners (John/Sandra), family (the Listers) ethical professionals (Rachel) and neighbourliness (Maureen next door) in the face of the endemic culture of crime, drugs and ruthless self-preservation that was already threatening to engulf Mark. As I will illustrate in later chapters, this strategy is deployed time and time again, not to evade the big social questions but to ambiguate by localising them as an alternative to the very real difficulty of positing any kind of a public policy solution. Other interesting texts of the period such as *Births Marriages and Deaths* (Tiger Aspect/BBC 1999 – see chapter six) work also to problematise the personal by underlining the broader ramifications of self-interested

action on others in a social group. They are thus, in a very Shakespearean way, "relational".

The Last of the Protagonists

This brings me to a further connotation of 'the individual' in fiction, namely the realisation of 'the self'. This has been central to the discursive characterisation of modernity and more specifically, it has been regarded as a paradigm for modern bourgeois drama. Consider for example Lukàcs' authoritative description of the bourgeois tragic hero that emerged at the turn of this century:

> The realization and maintenance of personality has become on the one hand a conscious problem of living; the longing to make the personality prevail grows increasingly pressing and urgent. On the other hand, external circumstances, which rule out this possibility from the first, gain even greater weight. It is in this way that survival as an individual, the integrity of individuality, becomes the vital centre of drama. Indeed the bare fact of Being begins to turn tragic. (Lukàcs 1984: 433)

In pre-industrial societies the inner conflicts of the individual had not been considered sufficiently problematic because "life itself was individualistic, now men, or rather their convictions and their outlooks on life, are." The dramatic ramifications, he adds later, are "that character becomes much more important and at the same time much less important": more so, because it provides the "vital centre" to the conflict; less so, because the conflict is merely "*around* and *about*" this locus, "solely for the *principle* of individuality". (1984: 435)

Lukàcs attributed this trend to a lost sense of external destiny in a secular world, and therefore to the paradox that because man is both agent of his own personality and product of his own environment, he must constantly 'find himself'. One problem, I think, lies in the continued assumption that drama is still preoccupied by this modernist paradox when, arguably, it has long since moved on. In fact the progeny of the vital self is what in postmodernity has come to be known as the destabilised or *de-centred* self – endlessly reinvented and in constant flux, without an 'inner core' of identity. Ironically, this shift in preoccupation has brought the general notion of the individual closer to its dramatic manifestations, hence the proliferation of models which characterise both the self and contemporary society as essentially performative.[7] The paradox is now less about 'finding' than 'acting'. According to Grossberg (1996) there are actually three separate planes of individuality – social identity, agent, and subjectivity. The exigencies of dramatisation will always privilege the first of these in any event, but with a few notable exceptions,[8] it does seem to be the television serial that is most consistently used to explore the dynamics between characters' external social roles. Unlike serious drama, situation comedy has long exploited the humorous possibilities of subjectivity, often by undermining the diegetic action with super-imposed images that show how a particular character sees, misinterprets or fantasises what is going on before him/her. In the 1990s, some of these techniques did begin to seep into drama, particularly in relationship sagas like *Hearts and Bones* (BBC/United 2000) that made heavy use of voice-over to indicate subjective mental turmoil and emotional dilemma. These remain, however, relatively unusual features of televisual style and for the most part the thematic imperatives of

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[7] For example, E. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1969). See also chapter two.
[8] Arguably, *Nature Boy* – see chapter 6.

self-knowledge and realisation seem to be overshadowed by a more intensive elaboration of the problems of inter-subjective behaviour, and/or *collective* identity. The conflict is less about a mis-match between subjective consciousness and external world, than between competing social demands.

Nevertheless, and in spite of this somewhat tribal imperative, the conflict between private and public remains a fundamental one in contemporary television drama, it is just that this is most likely to manifest itself as tension between one set of inter-subjectivities (say, family) and another (say, public duty), again with Shakespearean antecedents. As I have illustrated, *Butterfly Collectors* pushes to the limit the convention of inter-mingling professional interest stories with a narrative of a character's private life. Often this formal interweaving is a juxtaposition of two story-lines that serves to create parallels and/or thematic conflicts between the obligations of work and those of private relationships. In the case of the detective or medic, this technique also works to ally them with the position of the criminal or patient as subject, so making the latter more of a generalised human predicament. For example, the very conceit of *Cracker* is the remarkable way in which the emotional roller-coaster of Fitz' home life seems to parallel the lives of various murderers, thus giving him the unique ability to identify with a succession of disturbed and dysfunctional social 'outsiders'. Seriously overweight, addicted to cigarettes, alcohol and gambling, and unfaithful to his wife of twenty years, Fitz breaks every taboo in the unwritten broadcasters' yearbook of what mainstream audiences will accept of a protagonist.[9] Although strictly-speaking, *Cracker* belongs

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[9] So much so in fact, that in the changed format version entitled *Fitz*, produced for the more morally conservative environment of American network television, Dr Fitzgerald is a slimmed down, domestically functional, semi-malcontent who occasionally wields an unlit cigarette, and indulges in the odd night-cap.

to the first half of the decade, Fitz is a crucial character to consider if we are to understand the distinctive ideological basis of contemporary television heroes as his particular anti-establishment trajectory has helped to shift the detective paradigm for successors like McKeown. Tellingly, it is difficult to think of any later figure of a similar cultural stature, despite the best efforts of broadcasters to create vehicles for those actors newly tied to "anchor star contracts".[10]

Fitz accommodates a mass of binary contradictions: a police freelancer who hates the law enforcement regime, and a clinical psychologist who despises therapists and theory. He is fallible 'like us' and lacks the power of institutional authority. The very first episode begins as he gives a lecture advising his students to throw away their Freud and Spinoza, and consult their own souls for judgement.[11] Like Lukàcs' bourgeois hero, there is some suggestion of a conflict 'within', but not because he must grapple with his own sense of self: the very things of which he is absolutely certain are his own judgement and *who* and *what* he is. Moreover, he is never, ever wrong, even when all the evidence suggests that this time, he just might be. His battles are with other people (the police, his family, society-at-large) and often concern moral or practical issues. Notably also, he wages a continual war with normality which, as he often observes, simply *bores* him:

> I like the lows, they make the highs seem higher. Peaks and troughs, mountains and valleys. Give me that any day to that long straight flat boring road run by the likes of him.[12]

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[10] The most obvious examples would be Robson Green, and Ross Kemp both of whom starred in a number of new ITV series during the research period.
[11] "To Say I Love You" (Granada, 1993)
[12] ibid.

Although addiction is often characterised as an 'inner' demon, Fitz likes to believe his dependencies are only a problem because everyone else treats them as such. Because these are fixed elements of his consistent identity and symptoms of his battle with social mores, he is driven relentlessly, destructively to re-enact them on a social stage. All of this makes him determinedly identifiable whilst his superior intellect lends him both charisma and a sense of tragically flawed heroism. Fitz is all that would become a Shakespearean hero save that he never actually arrives at the ultimate point of destruction, but is simply trapped perennially in the Fourth Act. This is not because of a lack of *narrative* closure as each *Cracker* mini-serial is a discrete work, but because although their lives might change, the *personality* of popular protagonists tend to remain constant from series to series. In any event, as Feuer notes, it is important not "to confuse a *narrative* sense of 'progress' with a political sense of the term", and "it is arguable that a static conception of character is a more damning description of bourgeois social relations" (Feuer 1986:112)

Similarly, and although his personal journey almost entirely overshadows his professional investigation, McKeown too is driven by and towards something exterior to himself. First to nurture who and what he sees as signs of altruistic hope in a hopeless world, and later to discover the truth, because 'the truth' still matters to him in spite of his cynicism. If, like Fitz, he is something of an exception in contemporary television it is not because his battle for truth in the external world is anachronistic, but quite simply because he is a protagonist at all. Public professionals appear to be anomalies in television drama which - in spite of all the fears and hype about becoming 'star-led' – is now most commonly an ensemble-oriented medium. The explanation for this paradox lies in the nature of the very particular roles such characters play.

The Public Professional

Since the later 1980s, professional characters - like Fitz and McKeown - whose work obliges them to venture into the public domain, have become a familiar feature of peak-time drama. Usually, although not always, these figures are still embedded in a workplace assemblage, although they might occasionally be distanced from their colleagues by virtue of their position (say, Lenny Henry as the Headmaster in *Hope and Glory*, BBC 1999 -), or in the case of McKeown, because of their own disenchantment with the job and institution. They are always alienated from their superiors and others with real power, and almost always in the front line of public engagement. Even if they are self or privately employed (as say, in *An Unsuitable Job For a Woman* or *The Brokers Man*) the nature of their work and temperament invariably obliges them to become implicated in social and socio-ethical conflicts: they are very much "out there" in the public arena where "all sorts jostle". With the exception of obvious parodies such as Ben Elton's police satire *The Thin Blue Line* (Tiger Aspect/BBC 1995 -), there remains a fairly clear division between the stuff of sitcom and comedy drama (estate agents, management consultants) and that of 'straight' drama (police officers and doctors of course but also, more recently: teachers, probation workers and other variants). The only significant blurring of the two genres and their respective content is the late spate of so-called twenty- and thirty-something relationship serials of which *This Life* (BBC/World 1996 – 7) was a prototype (although even in this, the actants were also barristers), and *Hearts and Bones* (BBC/United 2000), *Metropolis* (Granada 2000), and *Attachments* (BBC/World 2000) were the most obvious successors. By and large, public work is a serious matter for television, and the mainstay of the contemporary drama series. It is also worth noting that the majority of social professionals either have a dysfunctional

private relationship or none at all. McKeown's initial apathy was a stylish generic inversion of the dominant trope which determines that little be allowed to distract public emissaries from the demands of work.

Notwithstanding this army of social agents with serious work to do, I would suggest that many of these foot soldiers owe considerably less to the heroes of say, the classic Hollywood film or the well-made play, than they do to the various historic guises of dramatic/literary narrator. One reason why certain contemporary television dramas have managed so successfully to introduce on-screen narrators and direct address into an otherwise fictional diegesis (for example, *Tom Jones* and *Holding On*, both BBC 1997) is that the conventions of mediation and *presentation* are already so well established by the medium. Even without the deployment of factive conventions, there is a case to be made for seeing such characters as intermediaries, or emissaries, whose function is to link the audience to the public realm. Like Fitz, their own personalities are often fixed and their personal crises are often a device to parallel or elucidate the social problems they encounter. Although audiences are invariably party to some small scraps of information denied to any single character, public professionals occupy a relatively privileged position. They are not like characters in say, an Alan Bennett play - part of a "story to the meaning of which they are not entirely privy".[13] Rather, they tend to be emphatically aware, and astute to the dynamics of the situation in hand. In other words, their own 'being' is not tragic, although they often *mediate* tragedies, and offer the audience both a view and an explanation of distinctively social phenomena.

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[13] Alan Bennett, quoted in Tim Adams, "Behind the fringe...", *The Observer* (Review), 29 Oct 2000, 3.

1: 4 Groups and Communities

Modes of Group Contemplation

The dispersal of narrative attention away from the individual protagonist and towards a social group is evident also in the changing rhetoric of television style. In order to clarify the differences between the aesthetic of television drama and that of cinematic film, theory has occasionally over-emphasised the televisual use of the close-up: implying that the fetish-isation of the human face in 1970s melodramas such as *Dallas*, constituted the quintessential use of the medium. In fact, the most frequent image tends to be composed as a mid-shot, the visual effect of which is to position the viewer at a slight psychological distance from individual subjects, and to disperse the focus of attention amongst other subjects. Corner similarly argues that the "middle close-up" is the dominant shot, and he ascribes its ubiquity to the small domestic screen and thus to television's range/depth of field which is more limited than that of cinematography.

The only problem with this explanation is that it under-emphasises television's deliberate narrative interest in group dynamics and implies that the evolution of its aesthetic has been driven by its *technological* capacity. He does however note that:

> This is not all a matter of loss. Television's scale, when combined with its typically domestic mode of reception, and then its forms of spoken address, provides it with the grounds of a relaxed sociality simply unavailable to cinema.
>
> (Corner, 1999: 26)

Many current texts actively arrest this sociality for particular ends. For example, contemporary directors tend not to fully utilise the potential of the medium for subjective suspense photography, much to the regret of those like David Pirie who would push it further towards a cinematic rhetoric: "Point-of-view shots are so often left out of British schedules that when you see them working brilliantly ... it seems a revelation."[14] Instead, as Caughie (1990) has pointed out, television fiction has tended to make greater use of the reaction shot, which again disperses the force of events amongst groups, rather than individuals.

Some theorists have identified recent developments in the use of televisual style and read these as evidence of a sea change in ways of seeing, or what Robin Nelson describes as "new affective order". For example, he offers a comparative sketch of the viewing experience of *Boys From the Blackstuff* (1982) and *Twin Peaks* (broadcast in the UK in 1990-1). The evident contrasts between the two serials enables him neatly to herald the advent of narrative devices such as intertextual rhetoric, 'pastiche of tropes', the blurring of reality with dream, and so on, all of which he implies were to become more widespread in the 1990s. Although he is at pains to point out that neither text was 'typical' of its time, there is still the clear suggestion that *Twin Peaks* exemplifies a formal *transition* from the social realist, linear historical narrative, affective and cognitive engagement of the earlier, British, serial:

> ... where *Blackstuff* offers to interpret contemporary history to viewers by setting agency in structure in a familiar realist mode referential to the everyday reality of working people in the early 1980s, *Twin Peaks*,

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[14] David Pirie, "Everyday Vampires", *Sight & Sound* 12, December 1998.

> constructed from fragments of past film and television in a signifying system divorced from everyday reality, offers transnationally the pleasures of intertextual play. (Nelson 1997: 16)

The differences between these two texts are indeed manifest, but the general extent of the stylistic transition should not be overstated. As already noted, inter-textual reference, whimsical dream sequences and the like still remain the domain of situation comedy (particularly those produced in America), whilst the vast majority of domestic mainstream drama series and serials today still pertain to the unbroken stylistic tradition of *Blackstuff*. Certainly, there is ample evidence of a continuing commitment to the attributes Nelson associates with the tradition, such as: character identification, emphasis on dialogue, lengthy shots, historical causality, linearity and temporal progression. Whether these attributes should be collectively described as "social realism" is another matter, and I will return to it in chapter three.[15] More to the point is that if there were other textual evidence of a 'new affective order' then it is one that is still in thrall to the narrative conventions that, (so Nelson seems to be implying) were superseded by Lynch's decisive and quasi-cinematic intervention. However much his claim may be restricted to the examples shown, it is difficult not to infer a wider application for the argument.

Amongst the texts broadcast during the research period, there is ample evidence of both cross-generic hybridity and an increasing willingness to experiment with techniques we might acknowledge to be poetic or spectacular in intent. However, it is difficult to see how the gradual changes and innovations of the last ten years can

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[15] In some cases the assumption also arises out of the paradigm of 'classic Hollywood realism' associated with Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson.

add up to a radical shift in perspective. The richest seam mined by drama practitioners has consistently (again since the days of the Wednesday Play) been that of non-fiction programming, and the 1990s were no exception. In the case of 'faction' dramatisations such as *The Murder of Stephen Lawrence* (Granada/Vanson, 1999) the techniques of documentary veracity were only to be expected, but the seepage also infiltrated the most unlikely of forms such as the costume drama, notably *Vanity Fair* (BBC 1998 – see chapter five) and *Tom Jones* (BBC 1997).

Arguably, one reason for this tradition of borrowing factual conventions is not simply to maintain a pretence of verisimilitude, and certainly not to confuse conceptual apprehension of fact and fiction. Rather it is that surveillant camera techniques – admittedly thanks to their implicit claim of distance and impartiality - are more suited to the group than the individual subject, to observing relations not inner psychology, and so have melded with ease into television's rhetorical repertoire. In fact, the most radical adjustment in the late '90s was the deployment of *fictive* conventions by non-fiction forms such as docu-soaps. These alleged to provide a 'fly-on-the-wall' slice of real life whilst effectively narrativising the subjects' lives as if they were fictional sagas, and led, in the second half of the 1990s, to much media speculation about public trust especially in the wake of newspaper exposés of staged or 'faked' scenes.[16] Whatever this narrative infiltration of real life should tell us – and I will return to the phenomenon in both chapters two and three – the conventions of mainstream drama suggest a far more stable and recognisable experience.

[16] Notoriously in *The Connection* (Carlton 1998), the subject of an ITC ruling.

The Tribe

As I suggested earlier, a lot of multi-part fiction narratives were set in public-oriented workplaces such as a police station or medical centre. Although style and content differed markedly from sitcom, the episodic nature of these still owed much to that genre's structure and situational premise. In reference to a specific 1970s strain of MTM sitcoms, Feuer alleges they substituted a "work family for the nuclear family", in other words:

> a 'mirror' family that was at once more realistic and more Utopian – realistic in that the nuclear family was no longer the dominant form outside the texts; Utopian in that love and work merged in an essentially harmonious universe that represented a throwback to a less corporate age – a residual ideology." (Feuer 1986: 108)

Given that the workplace 'families' seem to have proliferated as fast as real life nuclear ones have disbanded, the hypothesis at first seems to lend itself to more recent British dramas as well. So-called 'quasi-families' appeared to mutate throughout the 1990s, and ended up, for example, as a female football team in *Playing The Field* (BBC 1997-), and as other variously branded non-domestic groups of friends: whether laddish in *Eureka Street* (Euphoria/RTE/BBC 1999), female again in *Real Women* (BBC 1998 and 1999), gay in *Queer as Folk* (Channel 4 1999), in addition to the 'friend families' of all the aforementioned relationship sagas. Yet this locus of a group, harmonious or otherwise, would seem to demand a more complex explanation than the analogous concept of the family is able to provide. The bonds that tie the various members together are neither exclusively personal nor emotional, and roles they play are more frequently public than familial. One has only to think of

the predominant medical and crime dramas of the period (the 'precinct' format) to see that what unites the teams above all else is often the shared project of managing their particular section of the public realm. Whereas McKeown's relationship with Dex is undoubtedly paternal, it is also shown clearly to be somewhat improper and unprofessional, and his relationship with his colleagues and the broader community is the dramatised inverse of team unity. Yet his partner Sandra is a nurse, and one of the strengths of their relationship is shown to be mutual support in the face of the social obligations that even McKeown continues to feel.

More generally, it was also still common in the period for even non-soap serials to focus not just on close work-friends, but on broader and socially more diverse geographical communities: whether a village in *The Passion* (BBC 1999), *The Lakes* (BBC 1997 & 1999) and of course, *Ballykissangel* (BBC 1996-); upmarket apartments in *The Echo* (ITV 1998) and *Trust* (ITV 1999); and very frequently, an out of town council estate (see below). This also suggests that the group trend is only really comprehensible if seen in the context of the other 'public' dimensions of British television drama. For example, it could be argued that the phenomenon bears an equivalent relationship to the erosion of geographical communities and other public spaces as it bears to the disintegration of the nuclear family. Furthermore, I think it has to be considered in the context of television's social role and mode of public address (Corner 1995) and the centrality of television as a space for citizenship and a 'public sphere'.[17] As Corner also argues, "Television, by the very nature of its depictive flows, is involved in the constitution and maintenance of the contemporary public." (Corner 1999: 21-2) It is precisely because these modes and consciousness

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[17] The term is derived from Habermas' writings on the matter. See also chapter two.

can not easily be disassociated from the manner in which we interpret fiction (however discrete the dramatic form), that I think both the individual and familial aspects of television need to be qualified by a consideration of its profoundly *community*-oriented dynamic. The group is a societal microcosm not an elaborate family – a tribe in other words, with all the concern for behavioural dynamics that this term implies.[18] The 'tribal' model will be supported by a consideration of the symbolic deployment of public space in contemporary serials.

1:5 Open Spaces

> Regionalism has displaced class as the recurrent scene of television drama.
>
> A. A. Gill[19]

During the 1990s, the characteristic reflexivity of so-called postmodernity had also begun to inform a rather more intensively self-conscious use of place and setting, sometimes as trope, sometimes as metaphor. Quite often, it also manifested itself as the spectacularisation of the British landscape - relayed by long languorous takes of fields, peaks and coastlines - which although most obvious in costume dramas and sagas of village life, also began to inform the visual rhetoric even of detective series such as *Dalziel and Pascoe* (BBC 1996-). More than ever, sophisticated composition and high film budgets meant that otherwise recognisable parts of Britain began to

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[18] It is perhaps worth noting that some anthropologists and archaeologists prefer the term *bands* to describe small groups (of 25 to 50 people, often comprising families/close relatives), using *tribe* to refer to much larger communities of 200 to 800 people (made up of different bands with cultural similarities to each other). For example, see Hayes (1993), 29.

[19] Review of *Looking After JoJo, The Sunday Times*, 8 Feb 1998, 30/1.

look like another, sometimes exotic, country. The flipside of this same coin (or its motive) was increasing anxiety about global homogenisation, a fear that differences were being ironed out and that accents would soon be levelled by encroaching 'estuary vowels' and glottal stops. Because niche magazine marketing was frequently held up as an analogue for the future of broadcasting (as "narrowcasting"), international publishing phenomena such as *Wallpaper* (a stylish interiors magazine) seemed to present a cautionary vision, not least because it was the first international publication to sell identical copies in 43 countries, and had a deliberate policy against local editions. The imminent possibility of similarly all-purpose global programming served to exacerbate longstanding fears of a flood of American television imports during the late 1990s.

Certainly, there were also many series and mini-serials with scant regard for the actual place of their setting, which is not so much to accuse them of inauthenticity as to bemoan their lack of atmosphere, and a corresponding surfeit of generalised urban or rural clichés. For example, there were so few local accents or establishing shots of Bristol in *Without Motive* (Granada, 2000) that it could have been anywhere, or rather nowhere – a cast of compulsory Cockney coppers transplanted at the whim of the production crew. Glasgow, like London, remained a stereotypical crime capital – indeed, the fourth *Trial and Retribution* transferred briefly from a London (that was barely seen, yet established by constant reference to "the Met") to a fictive locale, recognisable only by the Glaswegian accents of its predictably aggressive inhabitants. Again, this is not an objection on grounds of representative realism alone: *The Lakes* had failed to feature genuine Cumbrian voices, but it did weave a certain spatial mythology of its own, at least generating a sense of the compression and distinction of a particular community within the scenic iconography. Ironically, late in 1999 the

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children glare, all is grey and derelict, punctured only by green, yet untended, wastelands. It is a tense sequence, even though there is no tangible source of danger, and firmly establishes the emotional landscape of the drama. When they arrive the Lister's house, with its crumbling fence and red door, looks no different to any other.

The endemic anxiety of sink estates is deployed in any number of socially reflexive serials from the late 1990s. Typically, the first *Trial and Retribution* had taken a local estate-based community's response to a child murder as one of its primary themes, although the exploration proved difficult to sustain once the thriller narrative approached its high suspense crisis and denouement. The second series of *The Cops* - a self-consciously documentary style dramatisation of the systematic, institutional abuses that underpin the 'camaraderie' of the force – was located predominantly on the Skeetsmoor Estate, where two of the officers were acting as community liaison. Punctuated by weekly neighbourhood spats, petty crimes and shockingly routine burglaries and assaults, the story of Debbie Sharpe ("just another" fourteen year old smack addict who died after an overdose) was sustained across several weeks. Unusually, this allowed the serial to explore the aftermath and focus upon the frustrated attempts of the police to jail the primary supplier, on the responses of the community itself, as groups tried to exact their own justice, and again, on police insensitivity to community feeling.

A further expression of this overwhelming sense of despair might be the innovative single *Twockers*[20], filmed on a Halifax housing estate, in which local teenagers played themselves, idly and hopelessly hanging around on waste ground for most of the day.

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[20] This film supposedly heralded what its director Paul Pawlikowski described as a new genre of "bleak TV", and was broadcast on BBC2, Sun 5 Sep 1999.

These hyper-realistic single texts only fed into the almost routine incorporation of social issues into the familiar topography of popular series and serials, and thus into the reiterative deployment of the estate (and its associated problems) as motifs. A great many such serials deploy the equation of sink estate with drugs culture as both reason and metaphor for despair (*Psychos*)[21] or as motive for desperate measures and further crime. A notable example of the latter is *Daylight Robbery*, (Hewland International/ITV 1999-), the first four-part serial of which was described by its producer as " Thelma and Louise do Romford"[22] as it presented four women driven to increasingly audacious robberies as the solution to their personal plights. One of these, Carol, has a teenage son who is a drug addict and whose last hope is to get him into an expensive private rehabilitation clinic. At one point her husband washes his hands of the lad, telling her that the estate they live on is at the heart of their problems, and their only hope is to get out before the same thing happens to their youngest son. Indeed, it was not until *Never Never* (Company TV/Channel 4 2000), a two-parter broadcast after the main research period of this project, that any kind of perspective on the estate was attempted. Although featuring crime and drugs as commonplace, this particular text at least portrayed a more measured and positive side to estate living, by showing how a community took action, formed a credit union, and eventually saw off the usurious tally-man.

Analysts of crime fiction have long stressed the importance of the metropolis as a source of modern anxiety, a far cry from Sennett's (1974/1993) characterisation of

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[21] Broadcast by Channel 4 in May/June 1999. The conceit of one episode revolves around a psychiatric patient diagnosed as paranoid, but vindicated when returned to his estate and fellow residents really *do* "come to get him".

[22] Cameron McAllister, reported in *Broadcast*, 15 Jan 1999. The serial was transmitted by ITV during September 1999.

the eighteenth century city as the dynamic centre of a thriving public domain. Sparks compares it to the frontier of the Western in that both are "open to being represented as situations of disorder, but the Western allegory of the foundation of the law in the process of nation building is supplanted by another notion of heroism whose main concern is with the maintenance of integrity in the face of urban anomie." (1992: 36) Arguably, although conceptually crucial to television crime, the British city in this context never did have quite the visual resonance that say, the metaphor of the "Asphalt Jungle" had in the American *film noir* of an earlier generation. Perhaps this has allowed the more humdrum symbol of the Estate to emerge as a potent successor: a fearful and fascinating 'other' place, a wasteland subject to its own rules and codes that law enforcers enter as if it were enemy occupied territory. By the end of the 1990s, the 'urban' problem had been cast adrift, and only the public professionals dared venture without the city walls.

Less common and metaphorically potent in contemporary drama is the suburban setting. This was used relatively sparingly during the period, usually as a synonym for lower middle class ordinariness. Some of the more interesting texts used the dreary familiarity of semi-detached suburban streets as a marked contrast to the action, whether a multi-million pound lottery win in *At Home With The Braithwaites* (Yorkshire 2000 -), lurking and repressed passion in *Pure Wickedness* (BBC 1999), or in the case of *Summer In The Suburbs* (BBC 2000) to highlight the terrifying respectability of a family who cover up the rape and murder committed by their young, and otherwise very likeable son. Silverstone (1994) presents a detailed and sustained argument for theorising television itself as a fundamentally suburban medium. He argues that broadcasting has irreversibly domesticated public affairs to make them accessible and recognisable. It now provides a new public sphere, as

genuine as Habermas' idealisation of its brief eighteenth century flowering, but one "constructed at the local level, albeit with materials provided nationally or globally." (1994: 68) Crucial to Silverstone's argument is that "this public culture is essentially suburban" with its mix of "the public and the private, of the individual and the collective, of the democrat and the consumer." (ibid. 69) One immediate problem here is that 'suburban' is of course a very loaded term, conjuring up images of un-neighbourly commuters and disputes over garden fences, and as Silverstone himself adds, it also implies "an anti-politics of withdrawal from the public sphere – of conformity, self-interest and exclusion", not to mention a lack of tolerance and solidarity. Now however neat a model this might present for television's self-appointed role as civic mediator or champion of consumer interests, it does jar with what we have clearly seen to be the orientation of most mainstream dramas. The 'otherness' of the sub-sub-urban Estate does not in itself position the viewer in Acacia Avenue. More significant is the constant reminder of the common weal, the tribe, and the workforce in the face of the stresses of the broader public sphere. Particularly if seen alongside the commonplace dramatisation of behavioural dynamics - and the implied need for inter-subjective understanding, tolerance and support – this simply does not square with an ideology of "not in my backyard".

The relative rarity of suburban topographies is another good reason to question the appropriateness of Silverstone's model, at least for popular drama. Underlying the narrative preoccupation with the work-place tribe is the tacit admission that these hospitals, schools, estates, represent the last vestiges of a public domain. These are often microcosmic territories that still fit Sennett's definition of a city in so far as they provide spaces 'where strangers can interact' and by extension offer an opportunity, however virtual, to encounter 'strangers' in safety. If this is a hankering born out of

the anomie of suburbia then it is nevertheless a legitimate desire for a more diverse set of social interactions than suburbia itself can provide. Similarly, if television is essentially suburban, one can only marvel at the frequency with which it stages contempt for itself. In fact, if there is a dominant new "structure of anxiety" that best characterises end of century drama, it seems to be the somewhat tardy lament for lost communities, those that are local but not necessarily privatised, and this lament would seem also to parallel a deep unease with unbridled individualism. The flawed strategy, yet attractive ambiguity, of series and serials such as *Butterfly Collectors* seems to lie in the interweaving of this sense of loss with the exigencies of self and tribal preservation that come to the fore in the midst of social disorder.

Temporality

Before I turn to the fraught matter of merit and value in all these dramas, I should just make some observations about their temporal dimensions. At the outset of this chapter I mentioned the hybridisation of dramatic formats in the 1990s: the elongation of the single play, the truncation of the short form serial, and the blurring of the traditional divide between series and serial narratives. A consequence of this, I noted, was to make drama a schizophrenic mix of routine and 'specialness'. For the remainder of this study I shall concentrate on mini and short-form serials – on all non-returning non-episodic dramas in anything from two to six episodes. For all their evident commercial determinants and constraints, these formats offer unique opportunities to dramatists and other practitioners, and since the demise of the single play this has tended to be the site of moderate experiment for mainstream television drama. There are the obvious challenges and benefits of extended yet manageable volume, and of ultimate closure, as well as the chance to transcend the known routine

of terrestrial schedules whilst staying reassuringly within them. By marrying seriality (see chapter four) with a sense of purpose and destination, the short serial can actually tap into the rhythms of the human trajectory itself. In fact, the form is arguably the dramatic parallel of a finite human life in a ceaseless universe: the certainties are openings and closings, the interim episodes unpredictable. According to Zygmunt Bauman the most likely analogy for individual existence in modernity was a pilgrimage:

> Pilgrimage is what one does of necessity, to avoid being lost in a desert; to invest the walking with a purpose while wandering the land with no destination. Being a pilgrim, one can do more than walk - one can walk *to*. One can look back at the footprints left in the sand and see them as a road. (Baumann 1996:21)

In postmodernity, with all its fragmentation and lack of commitment, Baumann claims the most apt successors would be strollers, vagabonds and players. By extension, postmodern relationships are defined by an essential "narrowness of focus and purpose, shallowness of contact." (ibid. 34) Amid the 24-hour multi-channel bombardment of rapid images that make up contemporary television flow, the discrete serial can be a more reflexive oasis. At best, it is an extended narrative symphony, a substantial process of fictive engagement and protracted gratification that rewards the time invested. It is invariably the journey and not the destination that is the point of all cultural practice (like, of course, life itself) but to conceive of a goal or end result is often also a psychic necessity. Even soaps provide interim termini but these narrative institutions tend to serve a different function, perhaps by more closely approximating daily life as it is lived rather than musing on its elusive wholeness. In

fact, even in the closed or finite serial, actual closure is still possibly less important than the reassuring certainty that the story is indeed, going somewhere:

> Destination, the set purpose of life's pilgrimage, gives form to the formless, makes a whole out of the fragmentary, lends continuity to the episodic." (Baumann 1996:22)

I should emphasise that this particular mix of temporal attributes is very much a potential quality, a possibility for the optimum exploitation of television's heavily social aesthetic and it is not always fully utilised. Nevertheless it has to be considered alongside all the other aforementioned factors that converged, and gave rise to the distinctive mode and tone of serials at the end of the century. In sum: the earlier liberation of television drama from the set and studio; the use of topography as metaphor and spectacle; the increasing importance of place as symbol, longing and cause for anxiety; the dispersal of attention from the self to the several and from the individual to the group; the transformation of the responsible professional (detective, doctor, psychologist and so on) into social navigator or mediator; and the relentless insistence with which the issues and priorities of inter-personal relationships are juxtaposed with the public realm and often privileged over private needs, desires and anxieties. These, I believe, add up to an insistently public orientation and it is in this context that I shall later propose analyses of certain other case texts. Firstly however, it will be necessary to confront head on those lurking questions of quality and value that surround contemporary television drama and inform its discursive reception.

CHAPTER TWO

Dramatic (Mis)appreciation –

consumers, commodities, criticism and aesthetics

> ... it also seems that the proper, decent future for world television should be based on a very simple notion that I should tell you the stories from my backyard, and you should tell me the stories from yours.
>
> Alan Plater[1]

If nothing else, Alan Plater's vision might make a cosy alternative to the bombardment of noise and spectacle we have come to dread in the digital future. As a pun on the BBC maxim ("nation shall speak unto nation") it also implies that these lofty old ambitions can be localised and reinvented for a less imperial age, and defends the authentic individual voice in an era of global babble. Yet in spite of its unprecedented growth, broadcasting - for the foreseeable future - is still likely to be a matter of the few speaking to the many. We may of course reassure ourselves that this need not discount its products. Indeed, we can have faith in the possibility that (by whatever unlikely process) television drama can function as a means of collective cultural expression, that it is not only the storyteller but often the zeitgeist that speaks. But such a premise becomes trickier if we wish to discriminate on grounds of merit. What might, say, "expressive" mean in this context? Clearly it can not just be a case of

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[1] "Speaking to Nations", The 1993 LIRA Lecture, (published in Elsaesser 1994)

"stories from", but "stories *of* and *for*", stories that are spoken *to*. In fact, it is precisely because television is not an egalitarian ritual of narrative exchange that we can not just take for granted the quality of the experience for all those merely *listening* around the global camp fire. Yet, though it is one thing to find textual evidence of a prevailing 'structure of feeling' as I did in the previous chapter, it is quite another to assess the value of an individual text. *Butterfly Collectors* may well exemplify certain contemporary trends but the deduction itself does not tell us whether it is a good or bad example, nor does it help us to make a distinction (if there is one to be made) between a text that is 'good' and one that is more specifically, 'good for us'.

In this chapter I propose to explore some of the imperatives and difficulties that today confront the "critical discriminations" that Raymond Williams once reaffirmed as "important and unassumable in advance" (1974: 4). As the problems vary according to context, I will separate my discussion into four sections. In 2:1 and 2:2 I will consider the discursive limitations imposed firstly by ideas about "quality", and secondly by relevant theories of the audience and society. In 2:3 I will address the role of criticism and associated problems of power, before taking a more abstract route, turning finally in 2:4 to the vexed matter of "aesthetics". It is a rather grand ambition for a single chapter and so can but be selective, although I will narrow its scope by concentrating primarily on the concept of collective, rather than private, value.

2:1 Ideas of 'Quality'

Debates about quality television are almost as old as the medium itself, but the deregulation plans debated during the late 1980s brought a bevy of different issues to

the fore. The Broadcasting Act of 1990 was key to this, because although both the BBC and ITV had long been obliged to provide 'quality programmes', the introduction of a "quality threshold" (to be met by ITV franchise holders) enshrined the concept as a fixed parameter. Such codification begged obvious questions of definition, and the response was a flurry of speculation about criteria.[2] The intention was often to lend some clarity to a debate that had been quickly hijacked by different commercial or political interests, and many of the contributions emphasised the sheer complexity of current ideas about quality and the semantic richness of the term itself. Nevertheless, there is also a rather circular nature to many of the interventions that simultaneously struggled towards definitions based on the achievements of the past, whilst appreciating the folly of being prescriptive. Many academics were reluctant to perpetuate the project, although others began to appreciate the renewed cultural and political reasons for joining in (see Brunsdon 1990a & 1990b). Although there were regular calls for the recognition of different and *contradictory* ideas about quality rather than an imposed consensus, plurality as the only doctrine was clearly going to be inadequate, and undermined any authority for identifying the 'well-defined' criteria that also seemed so essential.

A key question here is thus evidently going to revolve around the degree to which quality is an objective or a subjective phenomenon, although it is clear that a reason for the term's enduring potency is because it draws on associations with both possibilities. Etymological dictionaries usually give the root of the word as the Greek *qualis*, or the Latin *qualitas*, both of which were used to describe the nature or type of

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[2] For example, the BFI issued *The Question of Quality* (1990) now a much-cited monograph, and following a conference in Amsterdam, a collection of European contributions was published under the more evidently partisan title *Writing For the Medium* (1993).

something as opposed to its quantity. Although the plural 'qualities' is still used to mean the attributes of a thing, irrespective of its value, the singular 'quality' is now rarely a neutral term, perhaps because current English use of the term derives from the French *qualité*, as in eighteenth century use of "The Quality" as a reference to those of a high social rank. Discourses about "quality television" actively draw upon both of these traditional meanings, and can therefore imply that quality is a matter of *fixed attributes* (e.g. made of expensive materials), *innate value* (i.e. there to be recognised) and/or *relative value* (a matter of excellence or taste) – or indeed, all of these at once. One paradox is that although quality has to be ascribed *by someone*, unlike say, moral values, it is invariably attributed *to something*. Any attempt to shed any one of these connotations now risks omitting legitimate expectations from the agenda of public debate. Even so, many of the views raised during recent discussions have tried deliberately to whittle down the concept by positioning themselves at either the objective or the subjective extreme of the spectrum. It is worth examining a few typical arguments more closely if only to mark the logical dangers of the views they exemplify.

Consumer Sovereignty

By the end of the 1990s, *industry* debate about standards had ceased to pick over the niceties of criteria and had latched instead on to the structural policy questions of how quality might be best achieved, as if it had evolved in the meantime into a universally recognisable commodity. During the period, the television establishment's increasing obsession with global competition and its own multi-channel future soon revitalised demands for total deregulation - long after Thatcherite free market dogma had proved

itself spent in other economic fields. This meant that some rather fundamental questions were now being re-addressed, such as whether or not any kind of public service ideology might even be tenable in the post-digital *melée* that broadcasting was soon to become. In all the high profile practitioner conference forums the new rhetoric was of 'putting the viewer foremost' although the underlying preoccupation for most was about how to shape up to new competition. 'Consumer choice', so it was often argued, was finally at the threshold of its own omnipotence.

The last two MacTaggart lectures of the century confirm some powerful, emergent industry views. In 1998, the independent producer Peter Bazalgette elaborated a free market case against the paternalistic regulation of the "*ancien regime*".[3] Real choice, and preferably "real competition", he claimed, would finally shift the balance of power in favour of the viewer thus removing the need for the Independent Television Commission to make judgements about quality. At the same event, Elizabeth Murdoch took up the theme, arguing that television programmes were no different to any other consumer product, and like any other commodity industry "the combination of choice and competition guarantees that the cream will rise to the top".[4] A year later, Richard Eyre, then Chief Executive of ITV, announced that the final demise of public service broadcasting was imminent, and argued that it should be replaced by a notion of public *interest* broadcasting. This would not depend upon regulation but would be self-sustainable for the simple reason that it makes "commercial common sense" for mass broadcasters to engage with the 'public interest'.[5] As 'public' in this context seemed to refer to a collection of autonomous self-gratifying individuals, the

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[3] MacTaggart Lecture, Guardian Edinburgh International Festival, Fri 28 Aug 1998.
[4] Worldview Address, Guardian Edinburgh International Festival, Sat 29 Aug 1998.
[5] MacTaggart Lecture, Guardian Edinburgh International Festival, Fri 27 Aug 1999.

speech was simply a more circumspect variant of the 'empowered consumer' arguments that had been touted the previous year. Some opposing voices were indeed raised in response to all these speeches, but had been put firmly on the defensive and constrained by the agenda that had been set. In the main, opponents emphasised low levels of cable/satellite penetration, and argued that access to the new technology would be available only to the affluent. This was possibly the most potent counter-strategy available to them, and found an unlikely champion in John Birt (formerly an enthusiastic proponent of digital TV) who relinquished the office of Director General with a valedictory warning of public segregation into "information haves" and "have nots".[6] Other than this sort of objection, equally in the guise of 'consumer interests', there seemed no ideological tenet to rival the mantra of being 'market-led'. In fact, it had become increasingly difficult to discuss audience needs in any other terms, all of which meant that in his response to Eyre's 'obituary' Chris Smith, the Minister responsible for culture, soon discovered he had nothing to cling to but Reith.[7]

In other environs, the television faithful were fighting a similarly rearguard action. Two camps in particular were vociferous, each defending their own professional, yet decisively anti-corporate, interests. There was a significant writer lobby group, represented by the Writers Guild, and prone to apocalyptic public pronouncements about the imminent demise of a rich tradition of British television drama. They found an advocate in the critic Sean Day-Lewis whose *Talk of Drama* presents creative case histories from a selection of prominent television scriptwriters, and describes the

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[6] See for example, "Birt warns of digital TV danger", *The Guardian*, 6 July 1999, 2.
[7] In response to Eyre's speech Smith was reported as refusing to accept that Reithian dicta were dead. See for example, "Smarten up your act, Smith warns TV channels", *The Independent*, 4 Sep 1999, p1.

industry as the site of constant battle between artists and "broadcasting mandarins". Drama output is narrowing thanks to the might of the schedulers "who regard the cream of strong drama, 'the glory of the output', as an embarrassment" (1998: 14). A second camp again defined by its opposition to market-led thinking, was represented by the "Campaign For Quality Television". This had been set up by programme-makers initially in 1988, but relaunched in 1995 in order to promote public service television, public debate, and "persuade legislators towards policies which are creative and imaginative". Four years later, the CQTV released a report commissioned from the University of Westminster and somewhat emotively entitled "A Shrinking Iceberg Travelling South..." (Barnett & Seymour 1999). This declared unequivocally that quality drama had declined significantly over the last twenty years, again implying the existence of an incontrovertible objective model of quality programming. The evidence for their assertion was garnered firstly from interviews with practitioners, and supported by longitudinal analysis that revealed trends in volume (more soap operas, fewer single dramas), narrative form (episodic series had become the predominant form outside of soaps), theme (a much increased emphasis on crime detection) and setting (bizarrely, costume drama had apparently declined despite being one of the evident successes of the 1990s – see chapter five).[8] Although it was conceded that the 1970s were not a golden age, and the 1980s had actually been "a low point for drama across all channels" (ibid. 47), the authors still deduced that the subsequent drive for ratings had led to "pressure for predictable hits, renewable series, recognised stars and "drama reassurance", leaving less scope for innovation (ibid. 5). Much of the report was devoted to airing professional anxieties about budgetary constraints and shifts in

[8] Statistics were obtained from a comparison of two four-week periods sampled in 1977/8, 1987/8 and 1997/8.

the internal power balance of the main institutions. In both of these camps then, fear of change and outdated ideas about the relative inferiority of genre products were typically allowed to disguise the underlying poverty of theories as to what quality drama might look like, and criteria such as authorial autonomy were appropriated as automatic markers of its existence.

It was all to prove an inadequate response to what Thomas Frank has described as the "fantasy of the market as an anti-elitist machine". This, he elaborates

> was a strange faith but, by the middle of the '90s, it was a populism in the ascendancy. Everyone seemed to find what they wanted in the magic of markets. Markets were serving all tastes, markets were permitting good art to triumph over bad, markets were overthrowing the man, markets were extinguishing discrimination, markets were making everyone rich.[9]

The apparent triumph of market populism, particularly in certain bastions of British television, was still something of a surprise, given that pragmatic arguments against a completely unfettered free market are so well-rehearsed, and because in other creative industries such a system has often failed to deliver what it promised. As John Pilger has argued:

> Murdoch's so-called Wapping revolution remains a historic lie. There was no "dawn of freedom" for the British press, no "flowering of independent newspapers". The reverse happened. Of four national

[9] Thomas Frank, "The big con", *The Guardian* (Review), 6 Jan 2001, 1.

> newspapers launched in the mid-1980s only The Independent survives. There is now less diversity and less independence in the British press than ever before, while Murdoch's power has never been greater.[10]

One explanation perhaps is that although the economic case for intervention is a strategic response to the likes of Bazalgette, debates about the best structure will always remain vulnerable to differences of opinion about *what* it is they are expected to deliver. For example, as Geoffrey Nowell-Smith pointed out, there is no reason to suppose that a commercial system can not offer a type of public service as part of a 'contract' between supplier and customer: these might well "deliver quality to the consumer, particularly at the upper end of the market, but they do not deliver comprehensive health across the nation or a rationally integrated transport system" (1994: 39).

Quality as a matter of taste

Although eager to critique implied definitions of quality as "upmarket", cultural theorists have nevertheless been reluctant to champion alternative criteria or objects of value. This resistance to value judgements has often articulated itself as opposition to the few discourses of quality that would rival the consumer model: as for example, when Tulloch attacked Brandt (1981) for perpetuating an ideologically-motivated "alliance between a liberal academia and a 'critical' media practice" (Tulloch 1990: 4). Brandt's response was to question the inference that it would be better "not to value creativity", and he pointed to the danger that Tulloch's stance risked in underpinning

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[10] John Pilger, *New Statesman*, 18 Sep 1998, 24.

the right-wing populism of a free market philosophy (Brandt 1993:3). Although the philosophy of anti-criticism has been driven primarily by respect for the *diversity* of available concepts of quality, the same theories are often reduced to shore up the position of market populists who, for very different reasons, insist it is all in any event, only a 'matter of taste'.

Pierre Bourdieu's seminal *Distinction*, although now dated in some important ways, has been deservedly influential on the theorisation of 'taste', having as its "immoderate ambition" the need to give:

> ... a scientific answer to the old questions of Kant's critique of judgement, by seeking in the structure of the social classes the basis of the systems of classification which structure perception of the social world, and designate the objects of aesthetic enjoyment... (1984: xiv)

The extensive social surveys that Bourdieu conducted in Paris during the 1960s conclusively established that cultural tastes and practices were closely connected to educational capital and social origin. It was radical not least because it equated artistic preferences with other forms of cultural consumption and taste, such as food and furniture, and explicitly challenged the way in which "the ideology of charisma regards taste in legitimate culture as a gift of nature." Taste is not only learnt, but also class-specific and a means by which individuals and entire social classes distinguish their own superiority to others in what he dubs the "aristocracy of culture". Like many post 1950s cultural theorists, Bourdieu effectively discredited the possibility of innate value, asserting that: "A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence" (ibid. 2). Far from being a question of

personal sensibility, the act of empathy with a work "presupposes an act of cognition", and possession of the necessary code is very much dependant on upbringing.

The work pre-dates post-structural preoccupations with race and gender, and so belies the great influence of these and other factors on personal taste. Moreover contemporary post-industrial Europe has clearly changed so radically that the old certainties about class status are less and less tenable. Bourdieu paints a picture of a society before the deliberate upheavals and the blurring of high/low boundaries that are supposedly characteristic of the postmodern (and rather quaintly treats Petula Clark as the heroine of popular music!) Yet arguably, the *processes of self-distinction* he describes are still vividly recognisable, it is just that these are less readily mapped on to the fixed class positions of a known social hierarchy. In fact it has been culture, often in the name of identity politics, that has lately been the means of challenging old certainties, so proving the Foucaultian notion that power might be everywhere, but where there is power there is also resistance. As Terry Eagleton points out, whereas once "high culture, like that of the Almighty, was the view from everywhere and nowhere", this "realm of consensus has been transformed into a terrain of conflict." (2000: 38)

Yet it is not necessarily the case that hierarchical divisions between forms have been as conclusively levelled as some have claimed. As Frith points out, the "*frisson* of blurring the art/mass boundary depends on the boundary still being clearly drawn." (1996: 114) Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) cite a number of American studies which point "to the fact that rather than having a set of 'snobbish' or highbrow tastes, middle-class people are increasingly omnivorous and eclectic in cultural terms".

However, there are still discernible patterns of consumption relating to group boundaries which are defined say, by race as well as class and they conclude that "new patterns of trust and interaction" as well as "new patterns of inclusion and exclusion are developing." (1998: 174/5) I will later return briefly to the questions of identity, viewer choice and criticism itself, but think it important to establish at this stage that that however fluid the contemporary relationship between class and taste, the latter is still a matter of collective and social, as well as individual, construction.

Quality as a measurable object

Because neither the theorisation of taste, nor the philosophical contributions made by Mulgan *et al,* have yielded the instant answers beloved of policy makers, others have retreated to the other extreme of the subject/object spectrum, and sought solutions in the purely material nature of cultural artefacts. One international research project, sponsored by the NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute of Japan, began in 1990 and culminated in the publication of a work entitled *Quality Assessment of Television* six years later. This seemed to pitch itself midway between the distanced critique of the Academy, and the sort of statistical 'success' analysis that flourished under the patronage of channel strategists in the widespread management ethos of the decade. As Michael Tracey has noted, under the leadership of John Birt the BBC was not an isolated site of change: "Almost every major public broadcasting institution throughout the 80s was engaged in making itself more efficient", and for many the inevitable dangerous outcome was "that the pursuit of efficiency became an end in itself, as organisational process began to substitute for a larger, more idealistic

purpose. Means become ends."[11] Similarly, and instead of attempting to merely inform ambition, many of the NHK findings and recommendations (whether by omission or design) imply that scientific systems of measurement might actually substitute for programme making ideals.

The governing logic of the project is set out in Ishikawa's preface to the publication, in which he highlights the need to monitor the impact on standards made by encroaching commercialisation and the introduction of new media, and states that the overall objective was "to establish a yardstick to measure what we call 'quality of broadcasting'." (Ishikawa 1996: vii). The first part of the work is a survey of previous, qualitative social science research, whilst the second takes a more practical turn, relating attempts to specify "quality television" from the perspective of both professionals and audiences. There is much useful data here and it is not my intention to dismiss such endeavours altogether, but I think it is crucial that we consider their ramifications.

Chapter Five reports the work of an American team led by Robert Albers, who describes it as an investigation into professional perspectives on quality so as to "get beyond 'I know it when I see it' and to derive instead a set of criteria which may be usable as an evaluative tool."[12] Their findings, along with those of some earlier work by the Broadcasting Research Unit (1989), are amalgamated together with those of another similar British exercise and described in the following chapter by Tim

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[11] "Lean machine", *Sight and Sound*, vol 9 issue 9 (September 1999), 32.
[12] Albers R, "Quality in television from the perspective of the professional programme maker" (in Ishikawa 1996: 101 – 143).

Leggatt.[13] Although both teams drew on different sources for their research (including some academic studies and the guidance notes issued to jurors on competition and award panels), the most influential data is clearly the interviews conducted with programme makers. For example, Albers obtained the opinions of sixteen respected, mainstream American practitioners (executives, writers, producers and directors) on quality television, or what might more accurately be described as 'best practice' in production. In both chapters, the respondents' views are quoted verbatim which - although occasionally providing a diverting read - is often breathtakingly banal. For example, "storytelling skill" as Albers notes, is widely considered to be "necessary to quality", and according to Steven Bochko:

> It's too easy to say well if you just hire good actors you're gonna get good performances ... when you see a film, a show, whatever, whose performances are uniformly strong you must credit good direction. (Ishikawa 1996: 128).

In common with the 'technocratic' spirit of the decade, the urge to identify what management consultants describe as 'key performance indicators' seems to have overwhelmed any attempt at scholarly analysis, and the net result of the two projects is presented by Leggatt, quite without irony, as a "checklist" of ten questions for researchers to identify 'good' programming. These range from the relatively straightforward ("was the programme adequately resourced?") to the utterly subjective ("did the story-telling touch the emotions?"). A "supplementary question" he suggests, could well be "did it have that indefinable something that makes creative

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[13] Leggatt T, "Quality in television: The views of professionals", ibid. 167.

art?" One can only wonder whether researchers will get to make open comments at this point, or would it be yes and no answers only?

More seriously, one has to recognise that judgement of a finished product is a different practice to its creation: programme makers are not critics and therefore are frequently better at 'doing' than describing. In fact, what many of the professional respondents articulate are not artistic ideals, but the *norms* of contemporary practice: there is, for example, a fairly common refrain that television fiction should offer a seamless, naturalistic illusion. Rather than subjecting this to query the researchers have simply codified it, faithfully, as an abiding principle. Although it is deeply unnerving to discover such ignorance of the vigorously debated illusion/anti-illusion axis (see chapter three), the real danger I think is this automatic deference to the professional view. As John Ellis has observed, producer values tend to be acquired during the processes of 'learning by observation', so there is a common lack of awareness as to what they actually embody and from whence they came (1990: 37). The real gambit of this sort of project is to replace the old critical hierarchy (the 'gentlemen of letters' who once decided what was, and was not, worthy of inclusion in the literary canon) with a new 'professional' one. But how does it serve the public to make broadcasters the subject of what is effectively their own system of self-judgement? How could innovation of any sort ever be measured by criteria formed entirely from observations of current practice? It is in this, I think, that the rub lies, because the whole objective of the NHK project was to develop *standardised, international* criteria that could monitor rises and falls in standards over a period of time, and to compare the quality of one broadcaster with another. This means that the criteria can not be made dynamic or flexible, there can be no built in space for change or debate: the creative

rules that Bochko struggles to articulate today could still be the legislative 'standard gauge' in twenty years time.

It is not of course just the source of the information that is the problem. Simply codifying the canvassed views of audiences would present some of the same difficulties because not only would such a process allow little space for norms to change or for expectations to be surprised, it also lends itself to the reductive, manipulating tactics well-practised by political pollsters. As Nick Cohen has noted: "At first glance it seems perverse to condemn governments for bowing to the sovereign people. Yet populism has become a kind of curse because 'representative samples' are probed to find what playing of the law-and-order or race cards will placate the plebs."[14] This is equally grounds for a legitimate criticism of so called 'programme development by focus group consultation' which – although far less endemic than the writer lobby would have us believe – is still a reductive travesty of an audience-oriented aesthetics. However genuine the motives behind some of the BBC's own much trumpeted audience consultation exercises, the exigencies of collating and assimilating respondent views inevitably distils down to only the most superficial criteria of viewing preferences. This might well restrict practitioner autonomy, but not necessarily because audiences have been 'empowered': indeed, the shift in influence is entirely to the advantage of the analysts (now a thriving sub-industry) and of course, to those who commissioned the research in the first place. Whereas, as Mulgan has observed "everyone claims to speak for the viewer" (1990: 11), comparatively few it seems are generating relevant ideas with which viewers

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[14] "Opinion polls that lie", *The Observer*, 21 May 2000, 33.

might identify or which attempt to serve their more complex interests.

In fact, if ever there were a fundamentalist case for the reinvigoration of 'aesthetics' or discerning criticism it is exemplified by this sort of quasi-scientific research. Albers, Leggatt et al. bandy around so-called professional views about "realism", or "truth" that as if they were natural givens but singularly fail to recognise the rich theoretical traditions (Classical, Romantic, Humanist, Modernist) from whence they derive. It is easy to smile at this naivety, but 'league tables' have been introduced for education and health, so it is not beyond the realms of legislative possibility that the same be done for television, and the way something is measured is certainly intended to determine how that something should be done. As I propose to argue later, we will need to preserve the idea of the text as an object of potential, but this does not make it reducible to the material sum of its parts. In contrast to the NHK project, the contributors to *The Question of Quality* had agreed on one thing: that the first and overarching question should not be 'what is quality television?' but 'what is television *for*?' It would be a rare market research survey that asked viewers to speculate philosophically about the contribution that television programmes do, or could, make to private and social life. Whilst quantitative measures in the form of ratings, or even 'clashes and choices'[15] have their utility, even the most sophisticated variants of these can not substitute for a constant interchange of ideas. The logic of measurement, like that of the market, serves only to impoverish and disable alternative, thoughtful, discourses of value.

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[15] Leggatt himself cites a valuable work which suggests a simple mechanism for calculating the 'usable choices' a viewer might have at certain time-slot junctures in the schedule, by measuring the extent to which channels 'clashed' by offering the same genre at the same time. (Wober J M & Kilpatrick E (1988) *The Cost of Choice: A Calculus of Programme Want, Variety and Waste*, (IBA Research Dept, London)

2: 2 Audiences, Players and the Public Domain

> ... their eyes are open, but they stare rather than see, just as they listen rather than hear ... they look at the stage as if in a trance.
>
> Bertolt Brecht[16]

It is inevitable that presuppositions about audiences will inform debates about television quality, and many of these are often modelled in turn on a theory or characterisation of society: what it does, what it needs. In this section I would like to look at some ideas presently circulating about both, and demonstrate how a modified theorisation might yield a less pejorative view of television's potential values.

In their work *Audiences* (1998), Abercrombie and Longhurst point out that the last few decades of mass media research were dominated by the "Incorporation/Resistance Paradigm" (the IRP) which foregrounded issues of ideology and power by concentrating on the degree to which audiences accept or resist dominant messaging. They suggest that the views which made up the IRP are best described as a continuum with the notion of the 'Dominant Text' (one which presents an incontrovertible meaning and produces standardised responses) at one end, and that of the 'Dominant Audience' (for whom interpretation is an absolutely autonomous process) at the other. Increasingly however, the paradigm has proved to be restrictive, and although the issue of power is still one consideration, other areas of concern have become more

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[16] Quoted by Kiralyfalvi (1985: 346)

pressing, not least because of profound social changes over recent years. Abercrombie/Longhurst suggest that it has been difficult to address these concerns because of the intellectual restraints that academic paradigms tend to place upon the type of questions that are framed. Typically however, many of these issues have been thrown up by research *within* the paradigm. In particular, data generated by the recent shift towards the Dominant Audience end of the continuum has posed questions about the way in which audiences actively appropriate and use the mass media in their every day lives. Indeed, the shift itself was partly prompted by a desire to challenge the Brechtian/modernist charge that mass audiences are passive and/or 'anaesthetised'.

Shifts in thinking and new pressing issues now suggest the emergence of a new "Spectacle/Performance Paradigm" (the SPP). Abercrombie and Longhurst's discussion of this is worth looking at in some detail as it is offered as a synthetic and syncretic model of present intellectual trends, and has far reaching implications for the way we understand and value the role of television fictions in society. Crucially, there are different types of audience experience. An example of a *simple* audience might be at a football match or theatre, and it would typically be spatially localised, high attention, ritualistic and 'extra-mundane'. Television on the other hand constructs mass audiences, which tend to involve less direct communication, are private rather than public, more everyday, and engage less - or more variable - levels of attention. However, a basic tenet of the SPP is that the sheer proliferation and penetration of the mass media in contemporary society has led to a general diffusion of its effects. This has led to the predominance of the *diffused audience* experience which not only co-exists but now acts as context for the other two older modes of reception. The key feature of the diffused audience is that everyone is an audience all of the time: the

sheer volume of mass media has infiltrated the temporal, symbolic, and ritual fabric of daily life. This in turn is closely linked to the notion of a highly *performative* culture that is much-rehearsed in postmodernist theory.[17]

The idea that boundaries have been blurred (between performers and spectators, life and art, public and private, and so on) is pivotal, because if we are all of us audiences all of the time, then this new model is now mutually interchangeable with a model of society at large. Abercrombie and Longhurst argue that the most fundamental reason for this extensive diffusion is the intersection between the twin phenomena of *spectacle* and *narcissism*. In support of the former they cite some now familiar concepts: that of the pervasive "tourist gaze", the construction of the modern world as a spectacle, and Debord's theory that spectacular images are increasingly inseparable from commodities. The transformation from 'being' to 'having' to appearing' is now complete and the authors argue that the more widely the mass media spread their spectacular commodified images, the more diffuse and infused into everyday life the spectacle becomes. This is linked to the much-noted "aestheticization of everyday life" which they take to cover a number of trends such as: the predominance of style over function (particularly in consumer durables), the artistic interest in the hitherto mundane, and most importantly, the saturation of signs and images in contemporary society. The diffused audience is thus an audience of consumers, "all culture becomes a commodity" and "all commodities become aestheticized" (1998: 96).

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[17] See for example: Baz Kershaw, "The Politics of Postmodern Performance" in P. Campell (ed) *Analysing Performance* (MUP 1996); and Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York, 1990)

By narcissism, the authors take to mean a sort of performative exhibitionism: "people act as if they are being looked at, as if they are at the centre of a real or imaginary audience" (ibid. 88), it is "the treatment of the self as spectacle" (ibid. 96). Psychoanalytical uses of the term (such as self love, and impossible desire) are acknowledged, but keeping the important sense of 'the self' as central (and "central to an *audience*") they apply the idea more broadly "as a cultural condition, diffused widely, rather than a personality disorder" (ibid. 92). For this they draw heavily – and as I will later show, quite problematically – on the theories of Richard Sennett.

First though, it is important briefly to explain the role of the mass media and the processes of imagination in perpetuating what Abercrombie and Longhurst describe as the "spectacle-narcissism-spectacle circuit". The circuit is sustained by a continually renewable and *socialised* imagination for which the mass media provide the resources: fuelling day dreams and fantasies which encourage longing, which in turn reinvigorates and perpetuates the desire for continuous consumption. Although such processes inform personal survival mechanisms, they also enable us to live in imagined communities, and so are fundamental to our sense of individual and group identity. This represents a resort to a vicarious sense of belonging to a field of social practices that are actually heavily organised, not least because of the omnipresence of what Appadurai describes as the "mediascape".[18] This touches on a repeated assertion in *Audiences*, namely that these types of social activity and audience experience are unique to the contemporary world. Whilst the authors admit that some of the phenomena pertain to fairly longstanding traditions (such as that of 'life is a theatre'),

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[18] see A Appadurai in Robins (ed) *The Phantom Public Sphere*, (1993).

the very nature of the modern formulation is unprecedented because of the massive infiltration of mass media into people's lives. The sheer accessibility of the mass media is thus established as the primary factor of social change: the fast and continual interchange of images and symbols is a driving, rather than facilitating force.

One problem with this is that whereas the precise extent of media influence was once a pivotal question for research, the authors now simply take it as read that media saturation amounts to media determination. That a *quantity* of fictions should amount to a substantial *qualitative* change is quite a perilous proposition, not least because it plays straight into the hands of counter-rhetoric about extended choices amounting to improved ones, and of so-called 'consumer democratisation'. If the lives of ordinary people might have changed for the worse because of saturation, then one might equally argue that they have been changed for the better because they now have access to what others have always had. After all, at least since the Renaissance, the upper social echelons have always strutted their stuff, and their exalted circles have long resembled socialised theatres. A significant minority has always been able to aestheticise their lives, to live amongst beautiful objects, and ultimately to place style above function, precisely because they have been sufficiently privileged so as to disregard more utilitarian considerations. I would suggest that by repeatedly emphasising (and clearly lamenting) this phenomenon, the authors reinforce the dichotomy between so-called 'freedom of choice' (which depends in practice upon a whole host of other factors, such as having the critical resources and financial wherewithal 'to choose'), and a sort of inverted paternalism (which has little to fall back on ideologically but seems to imply that people should somehow be restrained

from enjoying what is not good for them). As I illustrated earlier, this dichotomy is still circumscribing most debates about television.

In tone, if not by declaration, the SPP paradigm is heavily-laden with negative value connotations, primarily because it is itself the confluence of a number of oppositional social critiques. This is most evident in the concept of narcissism, because although the authors do attempt to de-individuate it as a concept, the original sense of narcissism as a psychological *disorder* clearly informs their new generalised definition. Indeed, they devote several pages to elaborating the attributes Lasch ascribes to this personality type, such as most crucially, "the difficulty the narcissist experiences in distinguishing the boundaries of the self" (ibid. 90).[19] They also invoke Richard Sennett's insight that narcissism denotes such a state of self-absorption and a dedication to self-gratification, that fulfilment becomes impossible. From this point, the authors' association of narcissism with performativity begins to contradict Sennett's original thesis and as, arguably, the latter could yield a more positive vision of the role of television drama it is worth examining the differences. I will then make a few suggestions as to how the negativity encoded in the SPP could be substituted by more positive ideas.

In his seminal 1970s work *The Fall of Public Man*, Sennett argued that the growth of narcissistic behaviour stems from the gradual erosion of the public domain in the West since the advent of capitalism and secularism. Although clear boundaries and different rules were established for private and public interaction under the *ancien regime* of the

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[19] see C Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, (London 1980)

eighteenth century, we subsequently fell prey to what he describes as the "tyranny of intimacy". Contemporary society has confused intimate revelations with genuine expression, and this confusion is traced back to the gradual introduction of 'personality' into public behaviour (of say, the charismatic politician or the Romantic virtuoso performer), and the Victorian fear that inner character could be inadvertently revealed in all sorts of bizarrely biological features and behavioural slips. Gradually we have so come to project private, psychological concepts and values onto the public arena, that we now find it difficult to distinguish between the actions of public figures and their innermost character formulation. Yet legitimate public expression, he argues, is not a question of inner authenticity but has codes, rules and signs that need to be learnt, and it actively depends upon the use of masks, roles and other performative devices. Our misunderstanding of this has left us as 'actors deprived of an art':

> As the imbalance between public and intimate life has grown greater, people have become less expressive. With an emphasis on psychological authenticity, people become inartistic in daily life because they are unable to tap the fundamental creative strength of the actor, the ability to play with and invest feeling in external images of self. Thus we arrive at the hypothesis that theatricality has a special, hostile relation to intimacy; theatricality has an equally special, friendly relation to a strong public life. (Sennett 1993: 37)

Evidently this is a rather different and altogether less negative slant on everyday performativity. According to Sennett, play is actually *antithetical* to narcissism, which is more likely to be mobilised by enforced passivity (for example in some work places).

By contrast, Abercombie & Longhurst justify drawing a *correlation* between the two phenomena by reference to a contemporary preoccupation with style and outward appearances. Quite why this phenomena is so very different and more insidious than hitherto again seems slightly spurious: "It may well be true that social action in any society can best be described by the notion of role, but there is something peculiar to modern societies that gives the performances involved a particular twist" (1998: 74). There is no elaboration of this "twist" other than the blurring of boundaries between actor and audience, consumer and producer, and aside from this one qualitative distinction the only other differences are again, *quantitative* ones which basically boil down to the fact that today more people than ever before are engaging with more cultural commodities than were ever before available.

What the authors seem to be doing here is tagging on the notion of performativity to a presumed psychological adherence to the same fashionable 1970s notions of sincerity and 'being what you seem' that partly motivated Sennett's critique. The only grounds for anxiety here is the assumption that people are somehow deludedly trying to display what they believe to be their true selves. But how justifiable is this? As noted in chapter one, it is equally evident that the notion of inner authenticity and a fixed self has been actively *rejected* in postmodernity. 'Fin-de-millennium' trends for display and flamboyance might actually reflect a desire to keep the inner-self private whilst we struggle to find new or old ways of engaging with strangers. Sennett illustrated that narcissistic symptoms such as withdrawal and 'worldly asceticism' (most often a public statement of private self-denial) were quite logical responses to the encroaching powers of tight, hierarchical workplace institutions. This deliberately placed the

emphasis on the sort of power pressures that provoked the condition. If power issues are pushed aside (or re-ascribed without question to an all-pervasive media) then the essential rationality of narcissistic behaviour is obscured, and so the theory ends up effectively pathologising the entire public. Furthermore, obscuring causality could actually encourage a dogmatic adherence to an out-of-date diagnosis. Workplaces are changing and casualised employees are more and more obliged to 'shift for themselves'. [20] Increased performativity could well be an early symptom of these developments but equally, it could constitute a valid strategy for coping with them, a way of resisting increasing intrusion, and so it could, in fact, signal a societal move away from narcissism, rather than being an extension of it.

If one were to accept that one of the roles adopted by the media is as a performative resource, then its value in this sense rests or falls on whether we believe it is causing or contributing to a malaise, or whether it is not in fact a potentially beneficial resource for psychic and social survival. In a world of blurred boundaries, clearly designated dramatic texts could inherit increased responsibility: they could provide a safe zone, a play zone, a ring-fenced field of speculation and experiment. The 'special' status of peak-time serials and mini-serials is perhaps crucial here, as is the subtlety of the audience's psychic relationship to dramatic fiction. The role of what Raymond Williams famously described as "drama in a dramatised society" might well be to offer a rehearsal process by which we can exercise our collective minds in preparation for

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[20] See also Sennett's *The Corrosion of Character* (1998) for an account of the different damage wrought by more recent employment trends such as flexibility. More recently, he has joined Pat Kane in advancing a politics of "play" as a way of breaking through old ideological controls such as the work ethic. For an introduction to these arguments see Pat Kane, "Play for Today", *The Observer* magazine, 22 Oct 2000, 20-30.

what is, what could, and even perhaps for what *should* be. Nuttall's explanation for the "pleasure" of tragedy rests on the way:

> We send our hypotheses ahead, an expendable army, and watch them fall. It is easy to see how the human imagination might begin to exhibit a need, in art, for a death-game, a game in which the muscles of psychic response, fear and pity, are exercised and made ready, through a facing of the worst, which is not yet the real worst. (Nuttall 1996: 77)

This is echoed in Mepham's argument that television should provide "usable stories" which can act as "hypotheses or experiments of the imagination" whilst remaining true to their social purpose. (Mepham 1990: 64). Such insights will again be pertinent when I consider television drama as a way of representing 'reality' in the next chapter.

Sennett's persuasive and historical study exposes the fallacy of simply blaming the media for phenomena which have had a longer and far more complex evolution. He is still quite critical of electronic forms, arguing that they entrenched the silence and physical passivity first witnessed in the concert halls and theatres of the nineteenth century. But, notwithstanding his dislike, at no point does he suggest that contemporary problems were caused by, or restricted to, forms of mass entertainment:

> The needs which the electronic media are fulfilling are those cultural impulses that formed over the last century and a half to withdraw from social interaction in order to know and feel more as a person. (Sennett 1993: 282/3)

Performativity might now be a retaliatory response to this: a chance to get back out into the public domain and deploy the skills acquired from fictive encounters. If television was once part of the "arsenal of combat" of withdrawal, it could yet become a key force in sustaining the conventions necessary for a vigorous public realm. This possibility is endorsed by Sennett's theory of the "special friendly relation" that theatricality can bear to the public arena: because stage and street share certain problems, such as the need to arouse belief in an audience of strangers, he suggests that the expressive mechanisms of theatrical performance might equally serve as models for the modern *cosmopolis*. The feelings of hostility, rage and ruthless detachment that are so easily engendered by city life (with its excess of strangers and fearsome 'others') would certainly suggest a need for new conventions that help us to express without violence, and interact without intimacy. The sharing of codes between the dramatic and public realms might support a strong and vibrant public geography in which feelings can be *presented* "which signify in and of themselves, *rather than as representation* to other people of feeling present and real to each self." (ibid. 39)

As I documented in the previous chapter, television drama's relentless insistence on the public aspects of social life can actually help to 'work through' and query the boundaries of private and public ethics and behaviour. Although modernity may have witnessed the gradual retreat of 'high culture' into an ever-inward psychological quest, this is not the case with the quasi-Shakespearean relational stage of popular ensemble series and serials, in which behaviour matters more than subjective emotions. Crucially, serial television drama can also revisit issues and present multiple

perspectives. As Raymond Williams once observed, the popularity of forms such as British soaps can be explained in part by what has happened simultaneously in the realm of high arts. With a serial such as *Coronation Street* "there is an engagement with, among other things, the sense of the continuity of human lives. Much of the more serious contemporary art, characteristically and for its own good reasons, has dropped the generation succession of the nineteenth century novel", and thus evades an often quite legitimate human interest in "what happens next to people."[21]

Another crucial difficulty with the paradigm articulated by Abercrombie and Longhurst is that in its all encompassing notion of "the media" it reduces the relationship between drama and society to a variation of supply-side consumerism. The surfeit of cultural products encourages audiences not to merely equip themselves as public players, but enslaves them as ultimately self-deluding and perpetual consumers. This is simply a new slant on the old idea that people do not know what is best for them, and has parallels in say, the repeated comparison of popular television to junk food. According to the Peacock Report:

> If one believes that people should be allowed to make their own decision, and they appear content with a diet of manufactured junk food, then we can support all sorts of activities designed to enlarge their taste and inform them of the merits of other foods. But if after all these efforts they still make for junk food, that is their privilege in a free society. (paragraph 566, 128).

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[21] Raymond Williams interviewed by Stephen Heath and Gillian Skirrow, in T. Modleski (ed),(1986), pp3 – 17.

Both perspectives enshrine the sort of paternalistic assumptions that both camps would probably claim to oppose, although this did not stop Richard Eyre from declaring the very idea of public service broadcasting "a gonner because given the choice at the end of a tiring day viewers don't always choose what's good for them. Many will always pass on the wholesome, healthy and carefully crafted in favour of the easily digestible, pre-packaged, and the undemanding."[22] This, one suspects, is the true sentiment behind the rhetoric of market populism that secretly despises the 'democracy' it advocates. What is being ignored here is the possibility that given access to stimulating information and the wherewithal of real choices, viewers may, and often do, select precisely what they know to be "good" for them. As Mepham has observed:

> "stories do not simply satisfy one's taste in the way that a brand of cornflakes might. People look to stories to inform them by dramatising problems and solutions, opportunities and dangers, virtues and vices, and so to clarify all the endless conundrums which make up so much of one's life." (Mepham 1990: 63)

Stories are also a means by which we can mentally place our own lives in some sort of broader context. Fears of the imminent demise of national network television has led to an invigorated respect for the way the medium also provides opportunities for shared experience. Indeed, around the same time as Eyre apologised for his viewers' poor judgement, a rather more positive defence of popular programming was offered by his then ITV colleague David Liddiment, who claimed that on-going shows were

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[22] Reported in "Eyre's vision for the future of TV", *The Guardian*, 28 Aug 1999, 11.

often the "lingua franca that brings disparate groups of people together to enjoy a common experience in an increasingly fragmented society. This is a social good that has been so taken for granted that it has become devalued." More controversially perhaps, he also defended the rise of the docusoap and its increasing incursion into the apparently salacious:

> We've looked more and more to real life situations and characters for entertainment as well as information. ... It is here we find the authentic experience, comedy, tragedy, humanity, we can readily connect with. Not only do I believe that these people-based documentaries are a legitimate and valued part of a mixed peaktime schedule, I am very proud of them.[23]

It is this common sense notion of 'connecting with' that I think could provide a key to re-thinking what 'good' television could be about, not least because genuine engagement and empathy run directly counter to the autism of the "self as spectacle". Jan Simons has questioned what "the point of watching television is if television merely keeps its audiences trapped in narcissistic projections that confirm already existing 'social interests' and 'the meanings' that are determined by those interests". (Simons 1994: 83). The ideas of extreme subjectivity that he critiques simply belittle the legitimate part that dramatic emotion can play in transcending the cage of the self.

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[23] David Liddiment, "Critical Mass", an edited version of a speech given to the RTS on 1 July 1999, published in *Television*, (RTS Journal, Aug/Sep 1999), 10-13.

Abercrombie and Longhurst also argue that "consumers are increasingly *follower*-like in their tastes" and that they develop critical skills over time and with additional contextual knowledge about such things as the off-stage lives of celebrities: so making a 'cultist' more skilled than a 'casual consumer' (1998: 141). Critical skills are not then the product of thought, or of formal or historical knowledge about the range or nature of actual products consumed or on offer. Together with the suggestion that sign value has become inextricable from personal identity, this all amounts to a very extreme example of the *de-objectification* of the text, for it is no longer a bone fide object of detached analysis as it is merely an extension of the viewing subject. By logical progression we could thus begin to measure "quality" television in terms of who watches it, and how enthusiastically they do so. Indeed, this is rapidly becoming commercial orthodoxy, as illustrated in an article by Michael Jackson, the chief executive of Channel 4, in which he describes the channel's distinctiveness almost exclusively in terms of the personalities who watch it, rather than its attributes: "We have always aimed to be the channel for people who value freedom, permissiveness, hedonism, discernment, experimentation, ambition and individuality". Later he admitted: "We attract the most valuable audience in broadcasting, but it is being targeted by rival broadcasters."[24]

But needless to say, 'are we being served' is not the same question as 'how would I like to define myself', and a programme is not good because trendy people like it. The conflation of commodification and identity politics actually returns us rather ironically to the etymological prototype of 'The Quality' as a superior class of people. Frith

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[24] Michael Jackson, "Four The Record", *The Guardian* (Media), 5 July 1999, p2/3.

proposes a more modified theory of subjectivity in place of one of expression, maintaining that identities are not simply revealed by a choice of popular artefact but are constructed through "mutual enactment" with them:

> ...popular music is popular not because it reflects something or authentically articulates some sort of popular taste or experience, but because it creates our understanding of what 'popularity' is, because it places us in the social world in a particular way.
>
> (Frith 1996:121)

But Frith also insists that critical judgement is fundamental to the aesthetic experience of popular music, suggesting that there are *a priori* criteria to be met. Whether artefacts express or construct is a fascinating but rather inconclusive debate and it is sufficient for my purposes here to hypothesise that there is a negotiation by which some fit is sought between cultural consumption, the desire to signify (to strangers), and a sense of inner self. This suggest an incredibly complex matrix that is inadequately explained by models of narcissistic appropriation. In any event, societal narcissism is simply a specific psychological theory writ large, and this confuses two different diagnoses and value systems. If drama is understood merely as fuel and symptom to a pathological condition, then it loses a whole dimension as an artistic mode of communication. According to Tilghman, the traditional philosophical quandary about how aesthetic *objects* can induce emotion in a living *subject*, is largely a problem of its own making. Causality, he insists, is not the only issue:

> When we ask why a man loves a certain girl [sic] we are not interested in the causes of visceral changes, we want a list of her alleged virtues and to be told what he sees in her.... (1970:34)

This turns customary psychoanalytic and sociological approaches on their heads, for the simple reason that they are superfluous to speculation about the virtues of the text: a perfectly legitimate activity that does not have to mire itself in the quicksand of a universalised theory of private neediness. Human concerns are no less complex than ever they were, yet despite its best efforts to illustrate reception as an active process, audience-oriented scholarship has sanctioned a paradigm which reduces it to a variant of consumerism. If we theorise our own culture simply as commodities mapped on to individual identities then we can not complain if this is precisely what we are left with – indeed, we get the television we settle for. Paradoxically, de-commodifying audiences might be best achieved by de-subjectifying them, and strategically restoring the text as an analytical object. After all, without this we cease to have anything to connect *to*, as Alick West once reasoned:

> The existence of those qualities in Shakespeare's plays which make them valuable, no more depends on us than does the existence of the plays themselves. What depends on us, is how we feel those qualities. Marx said that a railway is only a potentially a railway if nobody travels on it. In the same way, it may be said that Shakespeare is only potentially Shakespeare if nobody reads him with appreciation. But the act of appreciation no more creates his valuable work than the travelling on the railway creates the railway.
>
> (Alick West 1937/1996: 104)

2:3 The business of critique

Although some ethnographic studies of reception suggest a less pejorative understanding of audiences than an overview of the SPP might seem to imply, even the characteristic emphasis on diversity could simply be reifying an old aesthetic axis, for as John Caughie has observed it may:

> ... have less to do with a radical change in terms of value than with a fundamental shift of attention – and of political faith - from text to audience. Rather than finally rejecting difference as the central term of critical value, this criticism instead relocates value onto the difference of consumers ... (1991: 132/3)

Exhausted by the doomed attempt to find sufficiently valuable differences in the attributes of popular artefacts, some critics have instead celebrated the myriad of ways in which they are consumed. A tangential argument is that because of this diversity, criticism is properly the exclusive business of individual viewers. The growth of new interactive technology (permitting the present proliferation of fan web-sites and 'independent review' pages) might thus be hailed as a champion of their empowerment. Needless to say, it is a trend lamented by some, such as the notable conservative Peter Conrad who recently observed that critics, once revered for their role in leading public opinion and inspiring artists, now simply advise consumers whether or not to waste their money. It is typical, he suggests, of a trend in journalism that seeks only to anticipate events rather than analyse them retrospectively: "The hierarchy of opinion has collapsed ... Nowadays, every punter has the right to his

pleasure, so long as he can pay for it, and no-one's taste can claim superior authority."[25]

Yet a reactionary stance is a slippery one to try and justify, not least because studies such as *Distinction* seemed to cast permanent doubt on the possibility of a system of judgement which is not self-aggrandising, class divisive or even oppressive. On the other hand, there are obvious problems with surrendering to a babble of privately-motivated individual opinions, however 'democratic' this might seem to be. Firstly, lone voices are unlikely to amount to a significant force for change and will never speak as loudly as subscription revenues. Much like opinion polls, they can also be appropriated at whim as rhetorical ammunition for pre-existing power interests, or simply provide a source of amusement on the grounds of their extreme eccentricity:

> With hindsight, it was inevitable. The net's innumerable chat rooms and bulletin boards are the perfect arenas for opinionated outpourings previously confined to the pub, the mirror or the analyst's couch.[26]

Secondly, all but the crankiest of critical opinions are never formed in isolation but make use of constructed, consensual criteria as well as being founded on sensory responses that are often shared. Arguably, the drive towards 'democratisation' might be more effective if directed at the *critical tools of judgement* which need to be better understood, theorised, debated and revised if they are to reflect what audiences care about (see 2: 4 below). Thirdly, as I have also illustrated, one consequence of

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[25] Conrad P, "What does he know that you don't?", *The Observer* Review, 26 July 1998, 2/3.
[26] Stuart Husband, "Don't mix your words", *The Observer* Magazine, 24 Sep 2000, 8.

celebrating diversity and individual taste is a tendency simply to commodify subject identities in place of cultural objects. Besides, as Nelson insists: "Not everything can be left to 'semiotic, enunciative and textual' productivity: textual composition matters, whether the principle of construction is realist or postmodern." (1997: 171/2). So passing critical responsibility to the viewer does not resolve some of the underlying problems with criticism whosoever might attempt it, and it certainly does not do away with the need for it to be an informed practice.

For a whole generational school of postmodern theorists the critical solution was to "transcend" value judgement altogether, by resisting interpretation and commentary in favour of perpetual deconstruction. This position has been much criticised, notably by Sim, on the grounds that it has betrayed its own radical objective and has led us not to "liberation but stagnation" and maybe ultimately "to a post-aesthetic desert?" (Sim 1992: 134). He argues that in the very process of problematising value judgements, a critic such as Derrida can not help but undermine his own judgement and illustrate his own latent authoritarianism and solipsism (ibid. 69): Sim acknowledges that although this utopian brand of politics has served some strategic utility by questioning the power of the critic, it still ultimately fails "to confront entrenched power structures" (ibid. 135). Elsewhere, Nelson bravely proposes an alternative and pragmatic way forward, arguing that absolute authority is not in any event necessary in order to hazard judgements based on the "temporary allegiances" of shared value. In support of this he cites Habermas' insistence that critique "must at least be able to discriminate between a power that deserves to be esteemed and one that deserves to be devalued" (Nelson 1997: 216). The position is also legitimated by Wittgenstein's famous tenet that judgement is based on experience – the knowledge of being in the world.

Because certain assumptions about rationality and common ethical sense underpins linguistic exchanges "intersubjective agreements within speech communities" can be defended rationally. A text which yields "common meaningfulness" is therefore possible without denying human diversity or making false claims to universality. Brunsdon also rejects the impasse of anti-aesthetics, and in her insightful discussion of television quality argues that it " is not the exercise of judgement which is oppressive, but the withholding of its grounds and the consequent incapacitating of opponents and alternative positions." (1990a: 73) It is interesting that even Bourdieu had discovered that the importance of social capital increased in the less 'legitimate' areas of culture which were further away from the knowledge imparted and recognised in the academic sphere. In other words, the less a critical judgement could be supported by scholarship (which however complex was at least rational, debatable, and *available* to those involved in an education process) then the more likely that matters of taste would be justified purely by the blanket assertion of innate superiority.

Today, the exercise of *unexplained* judgement finds its perfect legatee not in the Academy but in the claim that only the professional programme maker can act as guardian of the national culture. We know from Bourdieu's research that the artistic field is "capable of imposing its own norms on both the production and the consumption of its product" (1984: 3), but even within the logic of this broader domain, British television is still one of the most self-regarding institutions in the Western world. Despite the intensifying ruthlessness of the economic quest for markets, television practitioners still enjoy a virtually unchallenged authority when it comes to judgements of aesthetic merit. In the more established arenas of fine art, literature, or even film, whole sets of competing experts (critics, publishers, curators,

dealers, agents) are responsible for the discourses which surround artefacts and bring them to public attention. Although a few comparable figures exist in the television world, they do tend to have more economic clout than *symbolic* capital whilst broadcasters and a small number of fêted producer/directors still enjoy near monopolistic powers of evaluation. I refer not just to the ability to demarcate a serial as 'high quality' prior to transmission, but also to award prestigious accolades, such as BAFTAs and RTS awards. That the creative network should so often and so publicly have to set itself up against the commercial 'ratings mentality' of their besuited bosses thus indicates more than rifts within the quasi-capitalist set-up of the BBC: it is itself a symptom of the way any genuinely independent perspective has been traditionally stifled by deference to the professional view, for there is no need for professionals to develop any argument other than that of resistance to the market. By periodically championing polemics from these dissenters, the broadsheet press becomes the closest the public get to having "its" interests articulated, and the result is the previously mentioned poverty of counter-positions. Logically, if a system of cultural production enjoys too much autonomy in determining the symbolic as well as the economic value of its own products, then this simply makes it more, rather than less vulnerable to the counter claims of consumerist rhetoric. As Denis Potter once famously argued, self-justifying paternalism has only itself to blame for the ease with which the market has appropriated all alternative positions, particularly that of anti-elitism:

> The dangers of the older view of how to run radio and television are, unless faced and redefined, sufficiently troubling to leave enough space for someone such as Rupert Murdoch to drive a golden coach and a team of wild-eyed horses straight through the gap. ... The insecurities and contradictions of the BBC's only half-digested and half-shamefaced

> self-definitions lay like rubble spread in inviting heaps in front of the super-charged, savage-toothed JCB of his unslaked appetite.[27]

Again, this is precisely why a purely reactionary response to the encroaching idea of quality as a matter of consumer sovereignty is inadequate. The BBC's 'shame' resides in its own realisation that it has no ethical claim to public funds other than benevolent paternalism, and for reasons that Bourdieu should appreciate, this will not suffice. Yet, despite his seminal critiques of the self-serving practices of the cultural field, his latest publication seems to be just such a *volte-face*. The gist of *Bourdieu on Television and Journalism* (1998) is that market forces are levelling cultural standards downwards - not least because of their hold on journalism and television - forcing various fields such as science and art towards an audience ratings mentality at the expense of the very professional autonomy which gave rise to earlier achievements. The way out of this he suggests, would be "to pay more attention to the democratic redistribution of the achievements made possibly by autonomy", rather than making every expert decision the subject of monitoring by universal suffrage (1998: 76). This is all well and good if one is thinking of the field of philosophy (one of his pre-eminent concerns) but it is a tricky principle to apply to television drama. Not only is the medium the problem, so to speak, but one has also to remember that drama is itself a fundamentally communicative process. Unlike the sciences or even the visual fine arts, dramatic art ceases to exist without an audience and (unless one is willing to defend all those self-indulgent 'laboratory' theatre experiments that imploded in the 1970s) it can not even be developed without recognition of the need to engage one.[28] Aside from anything

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[27] MacTaggart Memorial Lecture, Edinburgh International Television Festival, August 1993.
[28] Restoring the text as object does not contradict this, so long as the idea of value itself accommodates audience requirements (see 2:4).

else, Bourdieu's polemic perpetuates the idea that television is primarily *parasitical*, living off and through the real arts, rather than being an artistic medium in its own right. If the art in question is television art itself, then it can not be conceived as a separate entity ripe for redistribution, and the argument for artistic autonomy can no longer apply to the same extent. Although, as noted earlier, it is regrettable that markets, audiences and the public have today become conflated – principally because this disguises the differences between their respective needs - one can not ignore that it is still essentially the same people who make up the various camps. Notwithstanding so-called 'viewer empowerment', as yet there is no mechanism for taking stock of "the audience" whilst ignoring "the market". What Bourdieu's intervention also typifies, however, is a feeling that market rhetoric is now so strong and unstoppable, that any rival ideology is better than none. Thus the problem is circular and intractable, unless one recognises perhaps that 'redistribution' of a sort can occur if the *criteria* rather than the practice of criticism can be subject to a more democratically accessible debate.

So if audiences need collectivising voices that speak louder than their wallets or home pages, so does the future of television drama depend upon voices other than the professionals who make it or the shareholders who benefit from it. In addition to statutory regulation and measurement, the burden of articulating the public interest can only fall on the critic, in spite of all the hegemonic risks. Criticism might not be objective in a scientific positivist sense, or even free from power interests, but it can at least operate independently of both the market and the professionals in thrall to it, yet without reverting to the absolute subjectivity of personal tastes. Because the public realm is a site of engagement and not just a sum of individual identities, a view does

not need to be statistically representative for it to be of significance. Yet, (and here lies the rub) in order to avoid becoming an independent variant of paternalism, the television critic has also to be ever mindful of positioning the audience as 'other'. This is not the exclusive preserve of neo-Reithians of course, in fact according to a former controller of BBC2, complaints against television always turn out to be made on someone else's behalf:

> That's even true of small children. If you ask eight-year-old boys in focus groups about their attitude to violence in the programmes they watch, they tell you that it's fine for them: they're used to it, they know it's not real. Their worry, their big worry, is their younger brothers.[29]

Scholarly attempts to find ways round this are hindered by such a paucity of published textual analyses that few might dare to articulate their own pleasures precisely because a periodic isolated interpretation tends to remain that way rather than becoming a legitimate intervention in a healthy exchange of views. There is a 'critical mass' necessary for constructive criticism, which, at present, does not exist: certainly the student will search in vain for published debate on any of the popular mainstream serials of the 1990s. The shortcomings of contemporary commentary have been well-documented and neither journalists nor academics have been spared (see Caughie 1984, and Poole 1984). Part of the problem is undoubtedly the sheer volume and transience of television output which makes such a fetish of the new, and so tempts newspaper critics to simply use review as an opportunity to display their own wit for the entertainment of their readership. But there are also more deep-seated difficulties

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[29] Mark Thompson, "Beyond Madonna's bed", *New Statesman*, 2 April 1999, 26.

at work here, not least because culture has become such an unwieldy concept: if its political significance is as exaggerated as Eagleton (2000) suggests, then it has been at the expense of practical critique. Yet it does not follow that there is no longer a need for it, in fact television writer Tony Marchant has argued that newspaper critics have an actual *obligation* to review new dramas - perhaps several times during a run – not just so they might help their readership navigate their consumer choices, but because if we do not evaluate and discuss programmes, then they cease to be part of our culture and do indeed become part of a "meaningless continuum of product".[30] In this sense, the act of public-oriented criticism can help to reclaim the cultural function of industrial commodities on behalf of social communities that might use them.

2:4 Aesthetics

The argument for transparency, independence and the right to speak is thus a necessary prerequisite, but one which leaves nagging questions as to the actual criteria on which informed judgements about artistic worth should be made. As we have seen, value axes depend directly upon the assumed social and psychic roles served by television fictions, but one might add that they will also rely upon more abstract theories of art. Eagleton reminds us that at the end of the twentieth century:

> Aesthetics, which began life as a term for everyday perceptual experience and only later became specialized to art, had now come full circle and rejoined its mundane origin, just as two senses of culture –

[30] When interviewed during a panel session at the Edinburgh International Television Festival, 29 August 1998.

> the arts and the common life – had now been conflated in style, fashion, advertising, media and the like. (2000: 30)

The bit in between, he adds, was modernity. The theme of regret that runs throughout both Nelson (1997) and Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) - in their discussions of the "new affective order" and "the aestheticization of everyday life" respectively - can thus be interpreted as a *lament* for this lost modernity, not least because of the well-defined boundaries it once imposed on Art. Yet modernism was itself founded upon a clear ideological critique of mass culture, and a return to its ideals would seem to bode ill for the recognition of values in popular forms.

The lexicon of dramatic criticism, even in the populist press, still draws heavily on laudatory adjectives such as 'original', 'innovative', 'challenging', and 'inspired'; as well as on inverses such as 'formulaic', 'derivative', 'hackneyed' and 'pedestrian'. All of these are in one sense *experiential* attributes, but the years have also lent them an unmistakable spin. For the Romantics 'Art' was diametrically opposed to bourgeois notions of material utility, and in post-industrial modernity a work of art had to be original and personal because Art was conscientiously defined as the polar opposite of the readily available artefacts of mass production. More recent television theory - although justifiably seeking a contextual approach to criticism – has perhaps over-emphasised the industrial nature of its products as if, *ergo,* they can be nothing more than the calculated assembly-line goods of a consumer system. This market determinism seems again to collude with the market populism of the Murdochs et al. but with different valorising implications. How might a television drama - the production of which involves the creative input of so many, such lengthy processes of uninspired, market-oriented and often committee-based decisions, makes such

extensive use of tried and trusted character types, genres and prototypical structures, and appeals to mass and allegedly indiscriminate audiences – ever begin to accord either with rarefied ideals of virtuoso transcendence or with the oppositional project embraced by the Frankfurt School? Institutionally, television sits at the polar extreme to the traditional art world, that "sacred island systematically and ostentatiously opposed to the profane world of production, a sanctuary for gratuitous, disinterested activity in a universe given over to money and self-interest *[which]* offers, like theology in a past epoch, an imaginary anthropology brought about by the denial of all the negations brought about the economy." (Bourdieu 1977: 197). By the standards of modernity, "television Art" is simply an oxymoron.

Observations founded on the economic logic of production also have equivalents in specific aesthetic criteria. Mulgan goes so far as to claim that the very nature of television "as a medium of the naïve gaze, may make it inherently unsuitable for the development of an aesthetic..." (1990:19) which suggests that which is popular cannot also be theorised as 'good'.[31] This also opens the door to those who would continually reify the desirability of authorship and its textual signifiers, often irrespective of the values on offer to the user. However, like the notion of consumer supremacy, the critical judgements invited by such an ideology depend wholly on the strength of the initial premise of mechanical determinism (whether by markets, authors, or systems). Anyone who has ever been party to creative production will testify that however much the process restricts the *individual* imagination, it is still not

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[31] See also Caughie (1981) who argued that 'Art television' at that time was characterised not simply by being 'authored' (and thereby different to most programming) but by a directorial rhetoric which encourages identification with the author rather than a given character or hero. Again, this consciously contradicts the 'naïve gaze' which is one of the pleasures on offer in many mainstream fictions.

possible to make a winning series from an industrial blue print. So-called textual 'formulae' then are neither predictable nor do they demonstrate the inevitable triumph of popular tastes.

Interestingly, Umberto Eco points out that contrary to Modernist sensibilities, art has always made use of strategies of repetition and innovation, and argues that pleasure can reside in the repetition of recurrent schema for their own sake. Because many texts have begun to take on the rhythms of everyday life, a "post-modern" aesthetics might well celebrate the minor variations and cyclical patterns instead "of emphasizing the phenomena of shock, interruptions, novelty, and frustration of expectations..." (Eco 1985: 179). The latter were contingent values that need to be reassessed in a broader context. It is not as easy to nominate standard, supposedly objective, criteria as some film critics would have us suppose[32] because these run the risk of being codified or fetish-ised, and we should always be able to justify attributes on cognitive or experiential grounds as well. This is the only strategy that would enable us to distinguish between the sort of complexity that *enriches* a text, adding both interest and engagement, and the other sort that is merely a display of skill or personal obsession. Furthermore, as we have questioned modernity's automatic rejection of some characteristics such as repetition, we need also to query the automatic virtue it ascribed to other characteristics such as intertextuality and reflexivity. According to Simons, television has so democratised 'connoisseurship' that such artistic hallmarks can now be found everywhere (1994: 80). The paradox of both modernism and post-modernism then is that neither ideology equips us to discriminate usefully *between*

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[32] For example, David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson argue that the criteria that they use, notably 'complexity' and 'originality', are the most appropriate for the evaluation of films as artistic, formal constructs on their 'own terms'. See *Film Art* (Addson-Wesley, 2nd edition, 1980), 37/8.

television programmes: modernism, because it would condemn all such machine made' artefacts; post-modernism, because it has witnessed and celebrated the mass appropriation of all attributes formerly reserved to 'high' culture.

What confronts us now, suggests Eagleton, is either a "disablingly wide" or a "discomfortingly rigid" notion of culture:

> Its anthropological meaning covers everything from hairstyles and drinking habits to how to address your husband's second cousin, while the aesthetic sense of the word includes Igor Stravinsky but not science fiction. Science fiction belongs to 'mass' or popular culture, a category which floats ambiguously between the anthropological and the aesthetic. (Eagleton 2000: 32)

> It is in the uneasy space between the two that the project of television criticism seems to have run adrift. Having tried to abandon elitism, it now finds itself frequently overwhelmed by what Williams called "the generality of the habit" of watching in itself. (1989: 4). It was only able to take some television seriously by taking everything seriously, so between modernity and postmodernity there seems to have been a lost opportunity to value television's services to drama more pragmatically. Even now, few would deny that drama is one of "the arts" but crucially, it tends to be spoken of as such only in the context of theatre, despite the fact that television is not only the chief distributor of this art form to contemporary audiences, but the chief producer and developer as well, making it a primary influence on the evolution of *all* dramatic forms in *all* media.

In spite of its sometimes strategic celebration of popular culture, post-modernism never actually superseded modernism, in fact the post-structuralist eschewal of value judgement has allowed some essentially modernist and often political criteria of aesthetic critique to thrive, even though these sometimes wholly contradict the prevailing tide of intellectual opinion or affective sensibilities. It is still perfectly orthodox, for example, to celebrate marginal texts which violate the so-called easy comforts of dominant ideology: even though one other consequence of postmodernity is that it is less and less tenable to conceive of an homogenous mainstream. Tania Modleski rather cleverly exposes the folly of this position, by arguing that if art is theorised primarily as oppositional, it is possible to make "a virtue of 'sustained terror'" as well as of latent misogyny, and she illustrates that horror films are "as apocalyptic and nihilistic, as hostile to meaning, form, pleasure, and the specious good as many types of high art" (Modleski 1986). Denied the mastery afforded by narrative closure, the male spectator of the violent horror movie is still permitted the opportunity to project the experience of defencelessness onto the female body. Celebrating subversion (whether of narrative conventions or 'bourgeois familial values') can entail a rejection of certain ethical codes we would be well advised to retain.

Similarly, the dogmatic championing of marginal cult texts and diversity is also liable to implode on itself because different moral values and identities are so often in conflict with one another. "Historically speaking" Eagleton observes wryly "there has been a rich diversity of culture of torture, but even devout pluralists would be loath to affirm this as one more instance of the colourful tapestry of human experience" (2000: 15). Moreover, a "pluralist culture must in any case be exclusivist, since it must shut

out the enemies of pluralism." (Ibid: 42) By contrast, he notes that many worker solidarity movements or emancipatory struggles have been united by reciprocal respect for the common experience of their wholly different circumstances. This does not mean that art cannot be grounded in the politically subversive experience of marginality, but it does put a different emphasis on its over-riding objective. As Jameson concedes, by definition a 'minor' oppositional project can never become the "dominant" of a radically new situation" (1992: 174). Logically however, dominance has to be a goal for radical television if it would preserve its mainstream and collectivising strengths. It is not sufficient then to simply celebrate the "intensified collectivization" (Ibid) of individual marginal interest groups, the lofty ambition of a new television 'culture' must also needs forge the links between those groups. Actually, with its opportunities to 'connect to' and its idiomatic insistence on the ensemble, this is something television drama is extremely well-suited to promote, even if it does not always do so.

Towards A Functionalist Aesthetics

When one looks at the aesthetic alternatives, it seems probable that the language of "quality" developed momentum precisely because it side-stepped the tricky question of Art. The problem being that it failed to develop a set of autonomous aesthetic criteria of its own, remaining parasitically dependant upon those already in circulation. The language of film and literary criticism are often both pertinent and useful, and indeed I will later borrow from them myself, but they do tend to work in support of their own visual and linguistic ideals against which television will always be the poor relation. This is not to suggest that television drama is anywhere near as grounded by factors

such as domestic reception, the small screen and other inherent limitations as some essentialist theories have supposed, but it has to be recognised that the particular social and technological origins of television led it to develop a unique aesthetic grounded in a sense of immediacy and social relevance. Indeed, according to Ellis (2000) the made-for-television movie is positively defined by its emphasis on "working through" issues of contemporary concern. Sometimes this associative topicality can give televisual metaphor a unique sense of relevance and edge otherwise difficult to achieve, but it is difficult to acknowledge this distinctive merit if one only has the concepts, models and vocabulary developed for other media in which it matters less, if at all. Still, there is also a paradox here because *over-emphasis* on some common features of television drama (such as its use of actualité techniques) may encourage too great a dependence on the realist critical paradigm, and engender too little recognition of its *poetic* capabilities. This stems from a complex legacy that I will unravel further in the next chapter, but I would stress here that a social function need not always be a table-thumpingly literal one, as ethical issues can be addressed through displacement or abstraction, and thought itself can be a metaphoric activity. I shall argue later that we must allow drama a certain latitude in *how* it fulfils its functions, my point here is to emphasise that only at the most trivial level would it be possible to talk of the "artistic qualities" of television craftsmanship without reference to its roles and responsibilities.

Nevertheless, there will be those who, like the NHK researchers, will try to ignore the complex genealogy of aesthetics and societal ethics, and attempt instead to simply divide a text into its material elements and relativise each against others of a similar type. They will thus set about measuring the number of shaky sets, badly lit scenes,

over-explicated denouements, and "the on-screen spend". But quality as a purely material commodity soon becomes problematic: it could mean for example, that just about everything on peak-time terrestrial television (and likewise from the West End theatre or Hollywood) was good, in simple contrast to say, *Video Nation*, Grotowski, or *The Blair Witch Project.* Indeed, it is precisely because mainstream television drama (with the possible exception of the early evening soaps) has become almost uniformly expensive that it has become rather fashionable for critics to simply note the presence of 'high production values' with tongue in cheek approval. For example, *Heat of The Sun*, a new ITV detective series set in 1930s Africa was greeted by one critic as "a serious piece of television drama in the way that a Mercedes is a serious piece of car. It may seem both self-consciously glossy and overly engineered but no one could deny that it is quality work."[33] Later press reviews dismissed the very same show as a triumph of style over substance, and according to *Private Eye*, it was quite simply "bad television" (1 Feb 1998). Again, one is continually drawn back to ask what exactly is this substance, this matter that should lie behind the well-polished veneer? What do we expect to fill this gap if not an ideal of its collectivising function, of the power of empathy, or even a modified concept of 'Art' itself?

Use Value

Quality debates thus continually imply the existence of a clearly defined arena of *relevant* aesthetic debate that simply does not exist. When we decide we are bored with the collation of statistics, or tired of our own neutrality on value questions, there is no traditional school of television aesthetics to which we can resort, making the

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[33] Jay Rayner, *The Observer* (Life), 25 Jan 1998, 65.

need to try and grow one a renewed imperative. Central to this could well be the concept of "use value" which has became increasingly popular with those cultural analysts reluctant to embrace modernity's built-in prejudice towards mass culture. The term derives from Marx of course, although economists now tend to disregard the 'rules' that he claimed govern the relations between value, labour and price. However, his original definitions do still provide a certain clarity: all commodities have use-values in that they satisfy some need or desire (and may relate directly to the qualitative property of something), but they may or may not possess exchange value which is the capacity to be exchanged for other things (and so depends upon quantitative relations between things). As Ang notes, post-1970s Marxist thinking presumes that cultural products have been degraded into profit-making commodities which privileges exchange value at the expense of quality: "Mass culture is the extreme embodiment of the subjection of culture to the economy; its most important characteristic is that it provides profit for the producers." (1985: 18)

Yet as Ang also insists, capitalist production is inherently contradictory, not least because "one cannot succeed in selling a commodity if it does not have a certain usefulness" and so the consumption of a cultural product can not "be directly deduced from the way in which it is produced" (ibid.) This beggars once again the industry/art dichotomy and yet, equally, problematises the view that would dismiss 'high' culture merely as the taste of a privileged elite. According to Bridget Fowler's re-assessment, even Bourdieu's later work admits "the use-value of some works may be retained after their fetishistic aspect of literary creation has been stripped from them." (Fowler 1997: 44) Quite how we recognise the potential richness of use-values is now a problem however, because populist resistance to cultural fetishism has not democratised

aesthetics but has found itself party to a set of insidious double standards. Despite Bourdieu, highbrow art works are still re-described according to the elevated criteria of beauty and truth, yet the popularity of mass-market fiction is typically explained with a more prosaic vocabulary. Attempts to discredit the language of higher art discourses has thus impacted disproportionately on more accessible cultural products, often leaving those which surround arthouse film, opera or the contents of the Tate Modern, remarkably intact. So for example, although Radway's deservedly influential analysis of female readership pays due heed to the escapist pleasures of fantasy, she does tend to attribute the outstanding success of some novels to the *ideological* satisfactions available from their construction of an "ideal" romance rather than as a result of aesthetic judgement (Radway 1987: 122). Many viewer studies have revealed a deep chasm in people's own minds between that which they enjoy (often guiltily) and that which they consider to be of good quality, but for reasons they are often unable to express. Mulgan calls this the constraint of "an overbearing conventional wisdom" (1990: 7). The unwitting result of this wisdom is that popular tastes are reinforced as simple pleasures, even by those for whom they are clearly more than this, whilst the ability of popular audiences to discriminate against say, clumsy language or under-developed characterisation, remain underestimated - even by themselves. The ironic embrace of populist 'pulp' or kitsch clearly does not alleviate the tensions here, it simply celebrates the superior knowing of its own 'bad taste'.

However they have mutated, the double standards of the continued high/low divide also imply a denial that popular artefacts are capable of arousing a distinctively aesthetic response that is quite different to ordinary sensations. In fact, there is a tendency to argue that the gratifications of popular artefacts are actually

interchangeable with other acts of everyday consumption. Whether there is such a thing as a discrete aesthetic experience has been much debated, but it is undoubtedly real to those who claim to have felt it. According to Kenneth Dorter, aesthetic imagination is as distinct from cognitive imagination, as the latter is different in turn from either reason or emotion:

> The special character of aesthetic imagination can be seen in the origin of the arts ... in religious ritual and ceremony. The fact that the immediate cognitive experience of such events was meant to refer to something of a different nature than itself, in this case something divine, shows it as metaphorical ... If there were no overt discontinuity between the art work and ordinary experience, we would have no need of art. (Dorter 1990: 42)

The proliferation of *anti*-aesthetic perspectives has considerable implications for the valorisation of the text, because if use-values are perceived only as everyday functions, then the extra-mundane qualities of popular texts will go unacknowledged. There is no need to mystify these, just to acknowledge that they are values of a quite different sort. Metaphor and allegory are examples of aesthetic attributes that are not reducible to any material utilitarian function, but this does not mean they have no public (or, of course, private) use value. It is difficult to appreciate something however, if we ignore its existence, and this again will be well demonstrated by the limitations of the realist paradigm. For use-value to be a viable, egalitarian critical tool it will become clear

that the concept must embrace the idea of a non-literal, non-cognitive level of metaphoric experience.[34]

This returns us to the vocabulary of traditional aesthetics, which is sorely under-used in many programme analyses that, as I shall later show, tend to have been more preoccupied by ideology than poetry. Yet simply resuscitating an aesthetics that defines itself in opposition to popular culture can hardly help us to recognise the latter's merits, nor indeed can a concept of art as a 'sacred isle' divorced from function and responsibility. The challenge is to amalgamate both the routine and the extra-mundane as use values within a pluralistic concept of art rather than treating them as its counterpoint. This would make it possible to regard artistic excellence as that which is *more* useful, rather than as a sign that it has transcended function altogether. Both traditional aesthetics and more sociological approaches have something to offer here: from the one we can preserve the sense of an aesthetic experience that is dignified and beyond the realms of the everyday, and from the other the recognition that the arts can serve (or indeed, serve against) inter-subjective understanding and the collective interests of a public sphere. As Eagleton notes, psychic, aesthetic and spiritual ideals have always betrayed the contradictions of capitalism because they are inherently critical of materialism. In fact, we might add, they are *beyond critique by materialism*. It is precisely by reducing these values to mundane approximations that the social science approach to art has played straight into the hands of a capitalist structure that was well aware that 'Culture' could never legitimate it effectively.

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[34] See Levinson (1990) for an analysis of how real emotions actually shadow the 'make believe' emotions induced by fiction thus producing a unique emotive experience. See also Branigan (1992: 196) for a more comprehensive model of fictional engagement and reference.

The idea of the work of art as an object of quasi-religious veneration is bound to disappoint, but the idea of artistic culture as that which helps us to transcend the self is worth retaining. It strikes me that although present society is well rid of highbrow disdain and cultural authoritarianism, it still has much need of traditional 'one' culture *ideals* (such as unity and reconciliation). Certainly, by mocking the tawdriness of materialism, these throw consumer values into question in a way only temporarily served by reactionary positions that look to the material conditions or institutions of the past (such as the single play) without its spirit. So-called 'higher' utopian concepts are not inherently incompatible with the idea of television as a communal *lingua franca.* The most worthy of the old ideals can be rehabilitated for a more secular age, stripped of their imperialist overtones, and so help us to find in the spirit of old Culture the germ of a new one. This, it seems, is exactly what Eagleton tries to do in his tentative reassertion of the fundamentally human values proposed by certain literary works, having already acknowledged the historical violence perpetrated *in the name of* (but not necessarily by) the cultural tradition of European 'civilisation'.

Modifying the idea of culture as permanent critique does not mean abandoning altogether an ideal of cultural practice as a progressive force, although it will require that some of the more anachronistically didactic ideas be jettisoned. Eagleton admiringly retrieves Raymond Williams' notion of a *politics of a common culture* ("a very complex system of specialised developments") that is organic but not totalising, essentially diverse but requiring communal action and belief. This is a vision that would also, he stresses, ultimately require political transformations towards a socialist agenda, and "it is precisely this that contemporary culturalism fails to see." (Eagleton 2000: 122). The ultimate objective should not be to perpetually politicise certain

forms of minority cultural activity, but to achieve a situation "to restore to them their innocuousness, so that one can sing, paint or make love without the bothersome distraction of political strife. It is true that there are proponents of identity politics who will then have no idea what to do with themselves, but this is their problem, not ours." (2000: 123) It is political activity and not necessarily culture itself that will bring this about, but culture still has an active, collectivising role to play. In support of this proposition Eagleton later enlists David Edgar's view of an alternative to both "the patrician model" of culture and the "populist" market/entertainment model:

> In contrast to both is the provocative (both in content and form): defining the role of the arts as challenging, its realm the community, its form the collective, its audience diverse but united in its commitment to change.[35]

Heady, unlikely stuff perhaps, but the basis of any value system has to be a balance between the evidently practical (and already proven useful) and aspirations that have yet to be realised. This is not the difference between utility and art, but between practice and promise, and we could start perhaps, with a model of practice that recognises what many television dramas have to offer. The intention would not be to celebrate norms for their own sake, but because it may be high time that we start judging apples as apples, and not as pears. Abstract models of television's place in society, the uses of fiction and the obligations of art will also need to be given more detailed substance. Traditionally, the more substantial debates about television drama have taken place within what we might collectively refer to as the realist paradigm. In the next chapter I propose to consider and contest the legacy of this paradigm, before

moving forward in chapter four, and suggesting an alternative model in the culturally functional prototype of myth. Finally, perhaps I should reiterate (although it would hardly be necessary in respect of any artistic medium but television) that neither use-values nor ideals can ever be assumed, still less codified or measured, we can merely debate their perceived relation to actual texts, and do so incessantly. Indeed, before it became besotted by its own importance (only to derail itself later in a typically bourgeois fit of self-loathing) this is precisely what criticism once set out to do.

[35] Edgar D, *State of Play* (London, 1999) p.25 cited in Eagleton (2000: 129).

CHAPTER THREE

"Here and Now" – the limits of reality

Dusting off the vexed question of 'realism' is more or less prerequisite to considering the use-values of television drama, as so many of the discourses that address these values have been conducted under its rubric. As we shall see, it is no longer just a matter of deciding whether television can be 'true to life', or as Dunwoodie famously suggested, that it should act as a 'window on the world', although these questions are by no means resolved. In fact many so-called 'realist' debates have developed to such a point that their connection with common sense notions of verisimilitude are increasingly opaque. Nevertheless, indirect connections remain, and the aggregate of all these discourses has undeniably dominated the short and spare history of television aesthetics, perhaps to the exclusion of other equally important aesthetic issues. What I am about to describe and discuss then is less a theory (or even a set of positions) than a sprawling web of inter-connected arguments, value axes and critical ideas that now infiltrate the most routine and unlikely of judgements.

Because there are already a number of lucid and useful summaries of realist theories and related philosophical debates[1] this chapter will not retread the same ground. Instead I will endeavour to dismantle some of the connections, and so try to unravel an inherited legacy of oppositional thinking about television. I also propose to isolate and test some

[1] Particularly useful are Nelson (1997), Corner (1999: chapter 5 – on narrative), as well as many others more specifically in the context of film theory e.g. Lapsley and Westlake (1988: chapter 6).

concepts and theories in application to recent texts, and so to look for pragmatic ways forward. Protracted (and occasionally, tedious) as some of the arguments have been, we can not simply reject the paradigm in favour of a newer, fresher set of questions. Still, it can be modified, and perhaps more productively, *supplemented* by other concepts and criteria that better accommodate use-values that have so often been ignored or taken for granted.

The following discussion must needs be selective and, for the sake of clarity, it will be organised according to certain traditions of realist or anti-realist discourse. These I will refer to under the somewhat loose headings: Liberal Realism, Marxism, the concept of the Classic Realist Text, Conventionalism, reference, neo-naturalism, and artistic realism. Although most of the arguments clearly assume the importance of what F.R. Leavis once called "ethical seriousness", there are substantial differences between the other artistic ambitions they propose.

3.1 Liberal Realism – the principle of harsh reality and the example of *JoJo*

> Viewers do not realise that they are meant to feel gloom till New Year's Day 2000. They demand reassurance, distraction and inspiration. If they cannot draw it from fiction, they will seek it in the concocted realities of

triumph over adversity that docu-soaps purvey.

William Phillips[2]

Most British television is all about smiling – and is really quite depressing.

Paul Pawlikowski[3]

Grim or "gritty" realism has a long and celebrated tradition in British stage and screen presentations, and I need not recount its history here. Self-evidently, the artistic imperative to expose the underlying harshness of real life is the product of a didactic, as well as an existential ideology. It is not, in other words, simply a question of outlook (of the glass being half empty) but of effect, of what viewers are "meant to feel". Although, as Auerbach once observed, 'ugliness' can have a highly sensory appeal whether or not it is linked with any social imperative (1968: 512), liberal realism (traditionally the hallmark of practitioners and journalists) has aspired to air issues and encourage public debate with a view to eventual social improvement. It should come as no surprise then, that *Cathy Come Home* (1966) is still regularly voted by practitioners to be the most significant British television drama of all time. Not just a text but a catalyst for change, Ken Loach's seminal tract on teenage homelessness allegedly galvanised a nation leading to public outcry and eventually, to the establishment of Shelter. It also exemplified the potential for immediacy and topicality that early television commentators had identified as the chief virtues of the new medium. Moreover, as Caughie has observed, the prestige

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[2] "Drama In A Crisis", *Broadcast*, 30 Oct 1998, 20.
[3] The co-director of *Twockers*, reported in *The Independent*, 4 Sep 1999, 9.

of the *Cathy* tradition was further legitimated by its association with a 1950s theatre practice styled as daring and 'controversial' (cited in Tulloch 1990: 119). The now canonical single plays of the 1960s have since come to symbolise the apex of British television as a dynamic social force and window onto the shocking truths of the contemporary world.

Yet as noted previously, political texts in the particular 'Wednesday Play' tradition had, by the end of the twentieth century, become something of a well-documented rarity, thus throwing into question *Cathy*'s continued role as a benchmark of dramatic aspirations. The final end to the years of Conservative government in 1997 seemed only to have taken further wind out of the sails of a liberal tradition self-styled as the voice of centre-left opposition. After nearly three years of the new administration one journalist commented: "maybe Blair's broadly non-committal, feather-unruffling Third Way style of government just isn't the sort writers of drama feel compelled to write about."[4] The exceptions to this alleged dearth provoked a telling response from commentators, and I shall look at some instances of this shortly. Firstly however, it is worth noting the pre-eminence of *Our Friends In The North* (BBC, 1996) if only because it was held up by critics for the rest of the decade as the last of the radical political drama canon, and a colossal monument to the outgoing Conservative regime.[5] Beginning life as an adaptation of Peter Flannery's Brechtian stage play (which had triumphed at the Royal Court in 1983), the gestation period for the television version itself spanned almost

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[4] Andrew Collins, "Acts of Parliament", *The Observer* (Screen), 13 Feb 2000, 2.
[5] Colossal because the 11 hours of screen time took over 40 weeks to film in about 110 British locations, and its total cost of £7 million swallowed almost half of the BBC2 annual drama budget. See for example Bruce Dessau, "Tyneside Story", *Time Out*, Jan 10-17 1996, 18/19.

fourteen of the seventeen Tory years, having been commissioned, cancelled and re-commissioned so many times that the author had, as he put it "grown up with the script, and the characters have grown up as I have."[6] The nine-part narrative covered an epic 31-year period of contemporary British history, concluding in the (then) present. Defenders of the social-realist canon pointed to its ratings as a sign of otherwise unmet demand,[7] and the serial garnered all the predicted awards from industry peers.

For nostalgic radicals, perhaps, things could not possibly get better, and later serials with social realist aspirations met with a more ambivalent response. One such text was *Looking After JoJo* (BBC2, 1998) and I will briefly survey the reactions it elicited as an illustration of the climate of critical opinion. This was a four-part serial whose cast (led by Robert Carlyle), writer (Frank Deasy, author of *The Grass Arena*) and director (John Mackenzie, a disciple of Garnett and Loach) were probably as responsible for its extensive pre-publicity and newspaper coverage as its evident political aspirations.

Deasy's objective had been "to write about our recent history, about a moment which was almost totally overlooked outside the ghettos where it took place: the moment when young criminals discovered heroin. That fusion changed urban life as we know it."[8] The rift between old and new style criminality was illustrated by JoJo McCann's rebellious betrayal of his uncle Charlie's family gang, and the story of his own tragic capitulation to the pleasures and get-rich-quick promise of heroin use and supply. Time (the early

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[6] Peter Flannery interviewed by Tom Lappin in "Northern Exposures", *The Scotsman*, 11 Jan 1996
[7] An average of 4.6m on BBC2, equivalent to a 19% share. (source: BARB).
[8] Quoted in Josephine Monroe, "Carlyle United", *Time Out*, 14 Jan 1998, 169.

1980s) and place (an Edinburgh estate) were given great emphasis to embed the action in a highly specific context at the same time as positing an explanation for a broader British social malaise by tracing the new drugs culture back to Thatcherite values. In *The Observer* Sam Taylor commented that "Thatcher's image hovers behind the protagonists ... like a malign spirit" but he deplored the hackneyed 1980s soundtrack.[9] In fact, the use of news footage, posters, and pop music as period signifiers owed much to *Our Friends In The North* although the devices did seem a somewhat heavy handed way of establishing a constant temporal setting. The authenticity of place was also a key yardstick of value and much was made of the serial's Scottishness: English reviewers seemed to have trouble with the accents, much to the irritation of *The Scotsman* which observed that "Scottish viewers have no difficulty with *Eastenders, Only Fools and Horses* or Derek Jameson, so why should the English have so much trouble with an Embra twang?"[10] Chris Dunkley saw it as part of the "impressively large catalogue of tough urban drama to have originated in Scotland over the past thirty years"[11], whilst Thomas Sutcliffe observed that its "grim assembly of high rise blocks" were every bit as cliché-ed a "TV Scotland" as that of heather, "wee boats", and concerned doctors.[12]

Yet the familiar drug-taking debris and sink estates of the urban iconography did not seem to have lost their impact, although some reviewers seemed to have grown weary of television's powers of exposé:

> If I'm going to have my nose jammed into life's armpit, I want it to be for

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[9] *The Observer*, 18 Jan 1998, 68.
[10] "How now, brown coo?", *The Scotsman*, 19 Jan 1998, 2.
[11] "Addictive Drama", *Financial Times*, 11 Jan 1998, 8.
[12] *The Independent*, 28 Jan 1998, 9.

some good reason, just showing nastiness isn't enough. All art is moral, whether the maker existentially wants it to be or not ... The bottom line is that if you treat horror and pain with glossy production values but no moral ones you don't show how stark and gritty and honest you are, you alleviate the nastiness. What you've done is become part of the problem.[13]

Similarly, Christina Odone went as far to declare that the characters were so unattractive and the "urban nightmare" so gratuitous that there was no reason to watch "unless you wanted to try heroin and didn't know how to go about it".[14] *The Sun* saw its devastating denouement as a "fitting end" to what had been "an hour of almost unbearable violence, squalor and misery", and pronounced it "a candidate for Shocker Of The Year".[15] Nevertheless, there remained a widespread assumption that the serial's "determined charmlessness" was very much to its credit,[16] and although few admitted to being personally shocked, many saw this as a valid objective for broadcast drama. In spite of Gill, one can certainly detect a lingering assumption that bleakness is itself a fundamentally 'realistic' phenomenon. Particularly revealing was Andrew Billen's cautious prediction that it might come to "be looked back on with admiration, either as a doomed protest at the rule of gloss or the precursor of a new, post Tory confidence in the power of television drama to interrogate society."[17]

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[13] A.A Gill, Review of *Looking After JoJo*, *The Sunday Times*, 8th Feb 1998, 30-31.
[14] "Do we want a drug user's guide?", *Daily Telegraph*, 13 Jan 1998, 34.
[15] 3 Feb 1998, 30.
[16] Thomas Sutcliffe, *The Independent*, 3 Feb 1998, 30.
[17] Andrew Billen, "A land fit for Heroin", *New Statesman*, 16 Jan 1998, 41-42.

A willingness to see society interrogated by the media is one of the hallmarks of the so-called "liberal-practitioner" realist platform. Fredric Jameson has argued that the chronological development of all media tends to conform to a sequential pattern of realism/modernism/post-modernism. These are dialectical stages comprising a certain logic that in, say, the obvious case of film, did not coincide historically with the same stage of development in other arts such as literature (which can trace the origins of its own realist moment back to the 17th Century). In social terms however, "the moment of realism can be grasped rather differently as the conquest of a kind of cultural, ideological, and narrative literacy by a new class or group" (Jameson 1992: 156), or as Colin MacCabe proposed in the case of film, it "carried out some of the same ideological tasks for the 20th Century industrial working class that the 19th Century realist novel had undertaken for the bourgeoisie." (cited by Jameson. ibid.)

These basic premises might lead one to account for the persistence of harsh reality concepts (such as authenticity and the power to shock) as a symptom of the tenacity with which a particular social group would retain their earlier 'conquest'. In this case the group would of course comprise post-60s practitioners whose claim to social authority is now under threat from the management and consumer culture of the television industry, but whose cause has been championed by their close peers in the press. Yet such an hypothesis does not throw much light on the underlying aesthetic issues nor the question of use-value, not least because it neglects longstanding debates about what realism actually is, and/or how it achieves its effect. The mantra of 'social realism' may have become a symbolic rallying cry for a once consensual, now fragmented, set of political and social ambitions, but is it no more (or somewhat less) than this? In order to probe at

what lies behind the rhetoric it will be necessary to turn to rather more theoretical and academic discourses.

3.2 Marxism, the 'Classic Realist Text', and the example of *Warriors*

Post 1960s television theory is pitted by recurrent dichotomies such as agency/society, illusion/consciousness, and story/truth. Not all of the arguments raised are strictly Marxist, but as the latter proposed a challenge to some existing ideas about realism I will also refer to the prehistory where relevant. One particular mini-serial from the 1990s will serve for the practical application of some key arguments. *Warriors* was broadcast on BBC2 over two consecutive days during the weekend following Armistice Day in 1999, its title an allusion to the tanks manned by a British battalion sent to Bosnia in 1992 as part of UN peacekeeping force. The drama set out to question the mandate that had been contrived for the UN force: notably, its obligation to provide humanitarian aid to Muslim enclaves, yet not to move refugees (as this might assist Serb and/or Croat projects of ethnic cleansing), and not to engage in active conflict with aggressive, and sometimes near-autonomous, militia. The BBC announcer introduced it as "the story of the men who risked their lives in someone else's war."

Grimly compelling throughout, the drama was at its most harrowing in the second part. A typical scene shows the battalion as they discover the bodies of Muslim families slaughtered in and outside of their own homes. The two tanks had simply turned off a road after spotting residual fires on a burnt-out settlement in an unspecified location, making any causal connection with preceding and subsequent sequences a subsidiary

concern. All of this lent it a sense of being a random yet typical occurrence and not in any actual sense, extraordinary. Still, the destruction of the area is appalling; the violation of civilian sanctity heightened by shots of charred washing on lines, and the bodies of children without shoes or socks. A Labrador puppy licks the face of a huddled corpse as a symbolic contrast to the absolute (in)humanity of the slaughter. A soldier suddenly shouts when a survivor is discovered: a young woman whose leg has been half shot away, and so terrified she fights off the army medic. By now they have seen wholesale slaughter of family after family yet the doctor is still visibly upset by her distress, suggesting that for once, perhaps, there is something positive to be done. Meanwhile, two officers (Lieutenants Feeley and Neil) have discovered a house full of the remains of people burnt alive, and a quivering private has to be sent outside. Again, their horror and latent anger is palpable. The very fact that they have in no way become desensitised by their exposure to carnage reinforces the vivid 'reality' of images such as a child's burnt-out skull, that for us too have become familiar hallmarks of war reportage. Shortly afterwards, Lieutenant Neil finally realises that the mysterious blue crosses they have seen daubed on some dwellings are there to mark those non-Muslim houses which are to be left alone. He sees a figure move inside the marked house opposite, and realising they must have safely witnessed the slaughter, his anger spills over and he has to be pulled away from shouting at their window.

The whole sequence is shot on a single, hand-held camera, but using high quality film, and sufficiently well-lit and smoothly edited to place it within conventional production practice. It is *verité* of a shaped and polished sort, deploying well-composed and framed images of atrocity, such as rows of charred corpses laid out in foetal positions, all

underscored by a mournful central European folk/classical violin. Like the presence of the unharmed puppy, these serve an undeniably emotive function, but avoid sentimentality because they are contrasted by some impressively understated performances from the actors involved. Because the men seem determined to choke back their own feelings, the familiar screen rhetoric of grief and genocide actually works as a subtext, suggesting all that is repressed underneath their professional composure.

Agency and Society

In *Warriors* - as in both *JoJo* and *Our Friends In The North* - the audience is re-positioned in relation to recent and memorable events by association with characters who were actively involved. According to the Marxist literary critic Werner Mittenzwei, there is a fundamental question that has always occupied writers: "to what extent can a work of art represent social events through the experience of an individual?" (1973: 105). Far from there being a common range of solutions to this recurrent dilemma, Mittenzwei is at pains to point out that the question has been formulated in different ways according to the priorities of different eras: the twentieth century in particular witnessed a mechanistic split between 'the individual-centred drama' and 'the society-centred drama'. Like Lukács[18] he notes how the 'late bourgeois authors' of the epoch (such as say, Beckett) generally represented "man as a being alienated from himself and from the surrounding world, who does not determine his destiny but is led by foreign, unknown

[18] (see chapter one)

powers, who is denied insight into the phenomena which rule him." (1973:109)

The 'individual versus society' dichotomy permeates modernist thought, not least because it is frequently mapped on to the hoary 'nature versus nurture debate'. Some critics of nineteenth century Naturalism have seen potential oppression in what Raymond Williams once described as the "passive" naturalist "doctrine of character formed by environment" (cited in Tulloch 1990: 117). Yet paradoxically, Marxist 'agency in structure' models have also informed a critique of many realist techniques on the grounds that they perpetuate a bourgeois conception of history as the work of 'great men', and ignore the socio-economic determinants on individual action. In a slightly modified 'post-Marxist' form the agency/society dialectic has been held up recently by Nelson as a criteria of 'seriousness': the reflexive acknowledgement of 'situated practice' being seen to distinguish television that aspires to 'the broad view' (1997:120) from merely diversionary, over-personalised narratives. As I noted in chapter one, the misapprehension that television is essentially 'individuating' is something of a red herring as many such objections tend to be about the *privatisation* of issues, which is a slightly different question. For example, one of Nelson's objections to the proliferation of 'flexi-narrative' (see 3:4 below) is that it privileges unusually self-aware characters and their inter-personal relationships which in turn "pre-empts the need for other televisual modes of exploration of character in society" (1997: 117). Later he gives *Middlemarch* (BBC 1994) as an example of how the "reforming zeal of Dorothea and Lydgate comes to seem more a matter of quirks of personality than part of an historical tendency since their personal relationships, with Casaubon and Rosamund respectively,

are made in their immediacy to seem the very stuff of life, in the manner of soaps and popular series."(ibid.145)

The specific pertinence of the agency/structure dichotomy to tangential debates about realism can be traced back to the influential Brecht/Lukács dispute of the early twentieth century, and more particularly in the way screen theory subsequently developed the concept of ideology and examined the formal possibilities of 'progressive' popular formats. At their most dogmatic, anti-realist advocates have tended to dismiss as 'humanist' the very possibility that for a great many, inter-personal relationships *are* the very stuff of life, or by implication, that relationships might be a perfectly legitimate subject for television drama to explore. They also ignore, like Nelson, that self-awareness can also relate to *situational* awareness, and this can be very insightful for audiences. One reason this has been so scarcely acknowledged is the presumption of television 'illusion' (see below) and of course, the Brechtian premise that emotional identification with a character is itself inimical to a critical appreciation of the material historical situation. There should be no doubt that this latter axis continues to inform evaluation - indeed, many press reviews of *Warriors* fall either side of it. For the most part, responses were laudatory, and praised the drama's sensitive embrace of such a complex scenario, but there was real venom behind the dissenting view expressed by Desmond Christy:

> It is not the way of television dramas to give us much help in answering the big questions about war, and *Warriors* (BBC1) is no exception. ... The emotions stirred up by *Warriors* makes us want to give the boys in blue the right to wage war against the Serbs ... we feel the smaller picture,

even when we may know something of the larger consequences of not being seen to be neutral.

No wonder there had to be a *Heart of the Matter* debate afterwards – essentially *Warriors* makes us feel rather than think. Like so many soaps, it always prizes strong emotion over attempts at reflection. And in *Warriors* our tear ducts create more moisture for our own soldiers, their characters boringly delineated, than for the victims of the war. ... I expect soldiers who served in Bosnia would like more people to understand what they went through, but my guess is that they would also find it rather indecent to bang on about it when they know that there are worse things than being traumatised – such as being murdered by your neighbours or seeing your children shot.[19]

There is doubtless a legitimate criticism to be directed at the drama's construction of the 'otherness' of the Muslim victims, even though both Neil and Feeley form strong attachments to individuals that they meet. However, the strictly aesthetic controversy Christy raises is to what degree a 'realist' drama might simultaneously move its audience and illuminate the 'bigger' ethical issues of the UN involvement in the Balkan conflicts? Further, and by extension, we might later ask whether or not this degree of complex explanation and journalistic impartiality is, or should be, a primary function of television drama?

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[19] Desmond Christy, "The dogs of war", *The Guardian G2*, 22 Nov 1999, 22

In addressing the first of these questions we should consider the manner and purpose to which the characters are developed before and after their Bosnian experiences. Structurally, the first half hour or so of the first episode is given over to introducing and establishing individual soldiers, whilst the final half-hour of the second is devoted to the psychological aftermath and inter-personal repercussions once they have returned home to their families. The 'incidental' data given in the expositional sequence serves only to benchmark the transition that is later seen to have occurred, and to illustrate their post-traumatic state at the serial's close. For example, Privates Skeet and James are initially portrayed as likeable Liverpudlian football fans. Fond of a drink and a night out, kind to their families, they joined the army to 'make something of their lives'. When James returns home after Skeet's death (and after a particularly harrowing scene in which he has to sort through a truck load of corpses to rescue a single buried survivor), he is a visibly changed man. He shouts at a spoilt child in the supermarket, is unable to concentrate during a match, and quite deliberately refuses to collude with Skeet's father in the pretence that their role in the conflict had been in any sense an heroic one. All of the men have similar problems adjusting - even the impeccably professional Lieutenant Feeley attempts suicide whilst on service in Northern Ireland.

Although each man's personal pre-history to the posting is carefully demarcated in the opening sequence, and the drama focuses at different times on an individual's response to events, it is the similarities not the idiosyncratic differences that are highlighted. The egalitarian apportionment of narrative time to each of the ensemble, their sensitivity to each other's reactions, and the clear logic of their sensibilities within the narrative context, all contribute to a strong sense that their individuality is immaterial - that they

are in a sense interchangeable, and their significance is as a *collective hero*. Their response to tragedy is generalised as human but not overly private: they are not motivated by desire or personal aggrandisement and the whole function of the aftermath incidents is to illustrate the relative triviality of daily and domestic conflicts after the life and death crises to which they have been party. Arguably, Christy's irritation with the narrative's emphasis on how the war affected the soldiers' personal lives is itself a product of a text which throws down an explicit challenge to an assumed audience position of domestic comfort, precisely by undermining those idle private issues with which the men and their families were originally preoccupied.

In this sense, even the 'otherness' of the civilian victims is justifiable because that is how the men regard them at first when they are simply unable to conceive of the scope of their experience. Thus the camera, initially positioned at a tank driver's eye view, proposes a central opposition between East and Western Europe, and so, perhaps, between suffering and stability. Further and far from denying circumstantial policy, the soldiers' dilemmas whilst in action are emphatically about their inability to be 'humanitarian' because of political exigencies. The limitation of independent (yet collective) human action is thus an overt theme of the piece. At one point the men turn off their radios, distract their UN over-seer and evacuate a community otherwise destined for annihilation. Afterwards they discuss their decision without any doubt as to its morality. Sergeant Sochanik (a Scot of Serbo-Polish parentage) comments: "I'm glad I did one good thing afore I got out".

This explicit declaration of principle is common enough in realist, political fiction which tends to be dialogue driven, particularly on television. For example, *Our Friends* uses Nicky as a fictive voice to articulate the particular political ideals and changing dilemmas of the Left. Geordie, his binary counterpoint, is shown by contrast to be a confused and unwitting pawn caught up in the economic and political endgames of those with power. Typically, in one episode he asks Nicky: "why do you bother, why don't you just float down the stream like everyone else?" yet it is Nicky's refusal to do this that enables him to embody the very ideal of consciousness and independent radical action. Similarly, *Warriors* articulates the collective dilemma of those who have to act within the parameters of military discipline and international power play.

Although such highly topical and ethically motivated content is lamentably rare in contemporary fiction, the establishment of a collective subject is, as we have seen, now a perfectly conventional television practice. Arguably, this suggests that Mittenzwei's perennial agency/society question is currently being reformulated in more *tribal* terms, shifting the focus of anxiety not, as often alleged, towards strictly private considerations but towards *behavioural* consequence: the causality and impact of human behaviour on communities or microcosmic social groups. Although it could be argued that this may be used to obscure the dynamics of state or institutional power, it does not necessarily naturalise them as 'acts of God'. In fact, the converse position is possible: because it can be claimed that the neo-Marxist emphasis on structure can actually relieve agents of responsibility by substituting a faceless institutional determinism for the divine superstructures that underpinned antique narratives. Clearly, some degree of individuation is necessary to illuminate the tensions and conflict of agency and

transformation. In this case, as in Brecht's own *Mother Courage*, the paradox of the conflict is that it is vested in impotence. The microcosmic role of the television drama ensemble is also a potential solution to the Lukácsian problem of 'typicality' in the realist novel, which was:

> ...to find a central figure in whose life all the important extremes in the world of the novel converge and around whom a complete world with all its vital contradictions can be organised.
>
> (Georg Lukács, *Writer and Critic*, cited in Lovell 1981: 71)

Dispersal from the single to the collective hero actually shifts the emphasis from subjectivity to situation and accommodates the postmodern recognition that a typical experience is also a diverse one. One might even argue that the trend towards community scenarios itself – albeit in a very localised way - reclaims the dramatic possibilities of active agency and change for the individual and his/her community. This requires group members to face their collective possibility (or impossibility) of changing their circumstances, to a degree that is impossible for the alienated individual of the bourgeois theatre.

Exact references to the political events and machinations behind the Bosnian war are sparse in *Warriors* but the soldiers' hostility towards the peace-brokers (illustrated by a scene in which they jeer at television images of David Owen) suffices to underline the disparity between this sort of abstract policy making and the daily decisions that must be taken by those involved in the ground war. Similarly, the recognition that socio-political phenomena can be questioned by fictive and self-aware characters from within a

conventional narrative form chips away at the automatic alignment of the agency/structure dichotomy with particular formal/aesthetic practices. Nevertheless, there are many other complex problems associated with the latter. Although these have been extensively rehearsed by theorists, many remain unresolved, and as the axes they suggest continue to shape critique in all contexts they must needs be addressed here.

The Problems of the Realist Text

Much of late twentieth century realist aesthetics was predicated on the belief that content (that which is actually said or represented) is inseparable and heavily compromised by the mode of representation, most particularly by any pretence at transparency. The full implications of this position for television drama were only really explored after 1974, when Colin MacCabe submitted an article later described as a "characteristic *Screen* text on realism" (McArthur 1975: 142). Classic realism, MacCabe argued, presented a hierarchy of discourses over which the 'metalanguage' presided and extracted the truth for consumption by the reader, and he defined the "classic realist text" according to its implicit relation between narrative and 'truth'. Because in film narrative the camera is privileged by appearing to 'tell the truth' it can in turn privilege one or more of the characters in much the same way as an author or narrator in a realist novel. The problem with this, he argued, being the 'unquestioned' status of the narrative which "fixes the subject in a point of view from which everything becomes obvious" (MacCabe 1974: 16). The proverbial cat was set loose when McArthur later sought to apply these ideas to *Days of Hope*, a series which aspired to a more radical position than those of conventional tele-histories and 'costume' dramas and which compelled him to identify

three basic difficulties with MacCabe's position: he was not at all sure that a transparent process of narration in itself conferred knowledge and truth; that *Days of Hope* had not one but three principal characters, none of whom were necessarily privileged bearers of truth; and pointing to the potential disparities between dialogue and image, he disputed MacCabe's assertion that a realist text cannot "investigate contradiction". MacCabe responded and the conflict evolved into a broader reaching discussion about the narrativisation of history and the 'progressive' possibilities of realism.[20]

I am not so much interested in the debate as it stood then, as in the way it has determined the agenda of subsequent (and much quite recent) television scholarship. Like a lot of heavily misguided yet seductively coherent theses, there is an awesome flawless flow to the logic to MacCabe's theory, and its influence, as Corner has clarified, might also be partially attributed to the way it marries different strands of critique: the literal pictorial realism of the audio-visual image, the lack of critical distance inherent to modes of narrative organisation in film and television, and the privileging of one discursive ideology above others (Corner 1999: 51/2). Given the various coincidental currents of postmodernist thinking (on such questions as history and narrative) and coming at such a formative stage of Television Studies as a quasi-discipline, it was also *timely*. All of which makes the theoretical legacy it bequeathed a highly difficult one to shake off, however "close to being devoid of any useful analytical meaning", as Corner also once argued, it has since made the very notion of 'realism' (1992: 9-102). Given that we are now well into a third decade of "MacCabe critique" it is no exaggeration to suggest that

[20] Extracts from various pertinent articles are reprinted in Bennett et al (1981).

discourses of television realism are simply inconceivable outside of the paradigm prescribed by his original thesis. For this reason, it might be helpful to retrace some of the perceived difficulties with the concept of the 'classic realist text'. In particular, critics of the concept have challenged: the idea of 'metalanguage'; the presumption of illusion; the mapping of a specific ideology onto a specific form; the underlying conventionalist epistemology; and the implicit notion of a passive audience.

(i) Metalanguage and Illusion

That contemporary commentary continues to be informed by this contested legacy has already been illustrated by Christy's review of *Warriors* and its inference that a "single and unquestioned position of knowledge" (MacCabe 1974: 21) can be constructed for the viewer, partly by mobilising personal sympathies for these nice, altruistic young men. If one were to accept the logic of MacCabe's concept of 'metalanguage' a sequence such as that described earlier (in which the British battalion discover the burnt out Muslim homes) would exemplify:

> ... an empiricist attitude to knowledge in which the process of production of knowledge (a process which constitutes both subject and object) is elided into the instantaneous moment of sight. This sight places the subject outside any area of production or process and always already in the position of knowledge ...
>
> (MacCabe 1974)

In simpler terms, the disguised rhetoric of the visual image establishes beyond doubt its own authority by the implicit claim: we know, we were there, we saw. Like McArthur, Christopher Williams (1994) has since attacked the reductiveness of the very idea of metalanguage and its equation with knowledge:

> If there were a position of knowledge, could it be located in the imagetrack alone? It certainly could not. If there were a position of knowledge (about the workings of a film narrative) it would have to be located in a combination or synthesis of several different tracks, strands or places." (Williams 1994: 279)

The "basic instruments of narrative articulation" he argues are not reducible to image alone but encompass emotions, ideas, characters, and conflict, all of which might be complicated, developed and resolved by the mise-en-scene, the layers of soundtrack, and so on. MacCabe was "simply wrong", he insists, "when he asserted that narrative discourse is not present as discourse or articulation" (ibid. 280). On this note, *Warriors* itself disproves MacCabe's over-simplification by dramatising the very contradictions (to act or not to act) that strictly speaking, absolute narrative 'annealment' would deny because if such a thing were possible, any perspective other than that of the soldiers' desire to act (and the visual imperatives for action) would be obviated. In fact, it is difficult to see how conflict might be represented if annealment were so certain.

The notion of annealment strikes at the very heart of the Modernist debate about 'illusion' and whilst the presumption of the 'passive spectator' has been widely

challenged of late, there remain widespread objections to the way in which the realist *text* effaces the means of production. Corner (1992) clarifies that there are actually two types of realist project: "the project of verisimilitude (of being *like* the real)" and "the project of reference (of being *about* the real)". He takes issue with the presumption that the stylistic and perceptual features of television representation automatically mean that television realism is 'illusory' in effect, and adds: "the idea of 'illusion' is a severely under-thought and over-extended one in television analysis, referring both to willed imaginative play and to deception ..." (Corner 1992: 99) Essentialist dismissals of television as a regrettably naturalistic medium very often incline towards the latter, but as Feuer has noted: "Television's foremost illusion is that it is an *interactive medium*, not that we are peering into a self-enclosed diegetic space", and so "disregard for the diegetic is a *conventional* television practice, not an exceptional one" (Feuer 1986: 104/5). Despite the drama serial's continued commitment to the diegetic conventions lazily associated with realism (see chapter one), the rapid interchange of rhetorical devices with non-fiction modes of address, and indeed, the multi-generic 'flow' of programming across broadcast schedules, both suggest that far more complex models of cognition are needed to replace old assumptions about reality illusion (or delusion). By the same token, the proliferation of 'anti-realist' reflexive techniques such as fantasy sequences, and direct address to camera, do not automatically add up to heightened consciousness. In later case studies it will become evident that such devices have become absorbed into the conventions and expanded rhetoric of mainstream drama, and are deployed for diverse ends.

(ii) Correspondence of ideology and form

The objection that screen realism does not simply reveal reality but shapes it through stylistic conventions (such as metalanguage), is co-extensive with the claim that the formal conventions of narrative storytelling also impose limitations and disguised meanings. The theoretical implications of this logic go far beyond the common-sense critical rejection of texts that are very obviously shaped, structured and polished, or as one columnist wrote of *Warriors*:

> But perhaps right now, at the end of the century, it is fitting that the most successful – and indeed moving – war stories should be the ones that don't try too hard to move us; that have the courage to steer clear of any of the seductively sentimental myths of 'heroism' and simply (though there is little that is simple about it) tell it like it is.[21]

Although Flett's comments recognise the artistic processes involved in revealing reality they still imply that this is merely a question of degree, and this in turn belies that essentially, all "stories offer structure, they organise and order the flux of events; they confer meaning and value..." (Nichols 1994: x). Indeed, as already noted, one of the issues under question in the *Days of Hope* debate was whether or not it is possible to present contradictory content in a 'dominant' form: an argument later extended to consider whether any narrative might ever simply "tell it like it is".

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[21] Kathryn Flett, "War – what is it good for?", *The Observer (Review)*, 21 Nov 1999, 18.

The controversy is at its most acute in theories of history, many of which have long held that the characteristic tendency of narrative discourse to impose illusory coherence makes it inappropriate for factual/historical discourse which has a more obvious cognitive function than art and should concern itself with real events, however incoherent. *The Content of the Form* (1987), Hayden White's seminal collection of essays on this issue, establishes that historical discourse developed steadily in form from annals to the chronicle, and thence ultimately to a form of sophisticated narrative analysis the latent objective of which was to derive moral meaning from the events of the past. The contribution of twentieth century semiotics, he points out, has been to undermine traditional distinctions between realistic and fictional discourse, and to expose the ideological controls behind authoritative 'myths'. The problem with this however, is that when belief in the adequacy of these stories begins to wane "the entire cultural edifice of a society enters into crisis", and it is for this reason that the last few decades have witnessed a "pervasive interest in the nature of narrative". Many historians have subsequently called for a return to the use of narrative in historiography, and "indeed, a whole cultural movement in the arts, generally gathered under the name post-modernism, is informed by a programmatic, if ironic, commitment to the return to narrative" as one of society's "enabling presuppositions" (White 1987: x/xi).

There is a rather neat irony to the idea of historians re-embracing narrative as a sense-making necessity whilst cultural critics were still struggling with the problems that 'realist' narratives pose for matters of historical authenticity. The circuit is complicated further by the de-stabilisation of the referent for *all* narrative and non-narrative discourse (see below) and the recognition that *all* historical explanation involves position-taking.

This is echoed in Jameson's recognition that because ideology in some form "is always with us" it can not simply be dismissed as false consciousness, for it is also:

> ...that necessary function whereby the biological individual and subject situates himself/herself in relationship to the social totality. Ideology is therefore here a form of social or cognitive mapping, which (as Althusser argued) it would be perverse to imagine doing away with; and I would want to make a similar argument about narrative itself. (1992:165).

Nevertheless, Jameson does go on to stress that occasionally, certain "dominant or daily-life narrative paradigms need therapeutic correction", which is a crucial ethical consideration best addressed outside of the realist paradigm and in the context of useful or dangerous 'myth' (see next chapter). Television theory may have been reluctant to essay discriminatory judgements in this regard because the institutional concentration of broadcaster power (exacerbated by wavelength scarcity) has traditionally restricted the number of alternative or counter positions that might be articulated and, so (it is assumed) privileges the dissemination of dominant ideology in any form. It is the conflation of this *political* deduction with the above ideas about 'form as meaning' that has sedimented into the orthodoxy that conventional realist forms correspond directly to privileged ideologies. Yet when held up to the light, the theory that there exists an homologous relationship between formal and ideological structures is at best a tenuous one. The presumption that the political attributes of a production structure can be mapped on to the aesthetic attributes of its products has therefore been heavily criticised for being fallacious, and for depending both on an overly-simplistic model of determination, and a model of an over-credulous public. As Lovell has noted:

Since the Gothic novel and earlier, some popular genres have depended not upon creating the illusion of reality, but upon a 'willing suspension of disbelief'. The ideological status of these forms can no more be read off from that form than bourgeois ideology can be read off from the form of realism. Crazy comedy is not intrinsically more 'progressive' than conventional realism. (Lovell 1980: 86)

Lovell argues that the ideological status of art depends upon its ideas not on its form, and moreover, (and having acknowledged that extra-cognitive theories of art bring us into potentially dangerous territory) she goes on to suggest that even at this level, its cognitive function is still a secondary one: "Once science had effectively pre-empted the claim to knowledge, the view of art as knowledge became vulnerable." (ibid. 92) The Althusserian and Brechtian position on this matter maintained that some degree of knowledge was attainable so long as there was 'critical distance', and I will return to this ideal in 3:4 below.

Meanwhile, the attack on the ideology of realist *forms* has also been rejected for more pragmatic reasons. Corner argued cautiously that the model was inappropriate, and that the thematic "link between television representation and social and political realities needed to be addressed within a different analytic frame from that provided by the study of form" (1992:99). Williams has gone further, claiming that whilst realism and anti-realism remain important concepts, "the clumsy club of ideology" is now unmanageable and should be jettisoned, not least because it has perpetuated a vacuum of aesthetic disinterest that highly reductive ideas about realism have attempted to fill (1994: 291).

The inherent anti-populism of the concept of the 'Classic Realist Text' is quite possibly the key to its considerable influence: it was politically motivated which made it attractive and repellant for similarly political reasons. The theory endears itself to those who object to screen realism as a hegemonic mechanism, as well as to those who would be contemptuous of popular culture more generally, and therefore see no reason to differentiate between forms, styles and media, let alone acknowledge the gamut of realisms and naturalisms deployed in mainstream drama. Unsurprisingly, considerable objections have been raised to this levelling out, and Ellis in particular was prompted to elaborate the material differences between film and television and their effect on narrative patterns of organisation (Ellis 1982: 64-66). Similarly, Corner (1992) emphasises that critics have consistently failed to take the full measure of the different text-reality relations of television to those employed in film or literary discourse. In any event, tying realism to a *mode of production* was always something of a distraction, as there are "at least four other kinds of real and realism: emotional, pragmatic, philosophical, and scientific, as well as the artistic kind, of which the nineteenth-century realist novel may well be a subset." (Williams 1994: 277) Williams also points out that MacCabe's concept has often been conflated with the concept of Classical Hollywood Cinema advanced by Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson. His objections are that this confuses a political thesis with an aesthetic one, and that the notions of 'classic' and 'classical' both presume the existence of coherent forms or styles that do not anywhere exist as monolithic entities.

3: 3 Conventionalism, Reference and Subjectivity

Although motivated and made attractive partly for political reasons, it is the epistemological premise of the McCabe position that explains how he was able to subordinate questions of content and ideas to considerations of optimum receptivity. Lovell summarises the conventionalist position as a denial that:

> ...there is an external, knowable reality which can be made accessible through the construction of works of art ... The conventionalist objection therefore to the conventions of realism is that realism pretends to be able to do something which cannot be done, and that it succeeds in creating the dangerous illusion that it has succeeded in representing the real, in 'showing things as they really are'.
>
> (Lovell 1980: 84)

It is a position which, she warns, has "radical implications", primarily because:

> It cannot be used selectively to undermine the pretensions of an art which claims to 'show things as they really are' without also undermining that goal for any 'discourse' including that of science. On the other hand, if the 'real' is knowable, then the realist goal is a perfectly proper one for art, and realism in art does not stand self-condemned as ideology." (ibid. 83)

Marxist critics had always held that the mere appearance of things was deceptive, but the shift towards stucturalist and post-structuralist theory legitimated the proposition that reality itself is only a relative concept. The Lacanian argument that the world of things is

created by the world of words challenged whether there is any objective factual basis to 'reality', destabilised the very possibility that an object text can represent or reference the outside world, and heralded the wide-reaching move away from the text towards reception theory. That the object world should only exist in so far as it is discursively constructed has been dubbed by Rorty as the "linguistic turn" and this has prompted what Habermas described as a massive levelling of the "genre-distinctions" between science, morality and art. This heady mix reached its apotheosis in Jean Baudrillard's polemical denial that there was any empirical basis to the 'Gulf War' which, as Norris demonstrates in his important critique:

> was just the limit point – the giddy extreme of a fashionable *doxa* whose symptoms ranged from the breakdown of informed critical debate in the media to the specialized varieties of intellectual bad faith manifested by thinkers of a kindred (postmodernist or neo-pragmatist) persuasion. (Norris 1992: 184)

It is not necessary here to indulge in a consideration of postmodern-pragmatist theories of knowledge and reality, not least because the theoretical transition did nothing to dislodge the low standing of television. Indeed, it is important to recognise the degree to which the medium has been implicated in both sides of the debate: whether as constructive purveyor of simulacra or mass manipulator of 'false consensus'. As Corner notes, Baudrillard's ideas were prefigured by equally apocalyptic theories of television which as early as the 1950s had stressed its "spatial dislocation, spectacularity, and 'phantom presence'"(1999: 33). What the shift did do however was propel the problem of reference to centre stage. Logically, if *the* real is unknowable, then a demonstrably

distorted account is as valid as any other. It is for this reason, as others have noted, that many theorists were "reluctant to surrender the epistemological advantages Marxism conferred, even when its influence declined" (Lapsley & Westlake 1988: 166). As Bill Nichols has argued, the denial of a 'world outside' simply leaves too many questions unanswered:

> Critics like Jean Baudrillard, who refutes the 'reference principle' by which an image might refer to a real world or anything anterior to itself, opts to celebrate how alienated we have all become. He wants us to enjoy a decathecated free-fall through the shadow play of simulacra. Perhaps the best we can do is what Baudrillard suggests. But along comes a moment such as the beating of Rodney King and the historical referent once again cuts thorough the inoculating power of signifying systems to turn our response to that excess beyond the frame. (Nichols 1994: 19)

Like the assault on King, the Bosnian ground war - so much messier, more anarchic and geographically closer to Britain than the Gulf – served as a gory reminder of the proximity of human barbarity, and it seems preposterous to deny its empirical existence. Indeed, in arts critique at least, this was never the intention: the original objective had been to contest the equation of 'facts' with 'truth', at least in so far as the truth is thereby rendered self-evident. Many have suggested that Baudrillard's love of polemic simply seduced him into an extreme corner. Since the 1970s, more pragmatic challenges to received accounts of history have emphasised that it is by selection and not necessarily distortion that domination occurs, leading in the 1980s to a number of wide-reaching projects to 'recover' the otherwise ignored, forgotten or marginalised histories of

oppressed classes, genders and races. The recognition that realities vary does not deny that texts *do refer*, but it does irretrievably problematise how we validate what they *refer to*. Lapsley and Westlake suggest that two possible answers to this were in circulation. On the one hand, there were those who claimed that texts appear realistic if they are seen to correspond to an existing ideology. On the other, the "classic structuralist" position proposed that the spectator and his/her concept of reality was actively produced by the text (1988: 169/170). Either way, the case against television as a self-fuelling generator of image-conventions as quasi-empirical referents can only be sustained if television (fact or fiction) is the only means of knowing *and* of experiencing the world. Yet as Habermas has pointed out, an individual can reject the validity of any utterance on any one of three bases: "because the utterance is not in accordance with either *the* world of existing states of affairs, *our* world of legitimately ordered interpersonal relations, or *each participant's own* world of subjective lived experience." (cited in Norris 1992: 165). Concepts of what constitutes reality are not arrived at by some arbitrary whim, they are the product of a constant and often consensual balancing act, that needs material verification. Similarly, Lovell insists that: "Reality is not, for the realist, coextensive with what can be empirically observed. But it does have effects which are open to empirical observation" (1980: 18). This ultimately, is also the premise on which Nelson rejects the logic of the 'classic realist' paradigm:

> It is on the basis of human intelligence and ability to take a more 'objective', broader view of the world that distinctions between fuller and more limited realisms ultimately rests, rather than on any claim about transparency of language and the ability neutrally to represent the

> historical world. The different discourses in play in any language inevitably contest regimes of truth. (Nelson 1997: 118)

Perhaps the most damning indictment of the 'classic realist text' is that its utility as a critical concept is severely limited because it makes few aesthetic or value distinctions between supposedly realist artefacts. By contrast, Nelson proposes a spectrum of the various available realisms that runs from *photographic* and *critical naturalism* through a whole range of others: *fantasy, formulaic*, and *critical*. However, one difficulty with the spectrum is Nelson's tendency to map certain formal or stylistic attributes directly on to a value status. In fact, he orders these categories into a hierarchy of value rather than addressing whether each proposes different values and should therefore attract assessment according to appropriately different criteria. To sustain the hierarchy he adopts a tricky relativism which implies that conventionalism is a matter of degree.

One key valence proposed is between mimetic texts (which appeal to the sense-making *conventions* of imitating the world) and "those referential realist texts which claim to be explaining the object world"(ibid.102).[22] Television drama realism, Nelson argues, tends to be a combination of mimesis and referentiality but "Drama which deploys mimetic conventions as a narrative strategy but makes no claim to historical reality must be distinguished from those other realisms which do." (ibid.113) 'Fantasy realism' tends to involve loosely paratactical, 'flexiad' structures and deploys signifiers for their aesthetic 'lifestyle' appeal rather than their referential capacity. Although admitting that they

[22] The distinction is derived from Christopher Nash, *World Games: The Tradition of Anti-Realist Revolt*, (Methuen, London, 1987).

potentially provide space for divergent interpretations and pleasures, they nevertheless constitute a flight from the real. 'Formulaic realism' (a step up the value hierarchy), also depends heavily on shared conventions to represent reality but these purport to resemble lived experience more closely: whereas ways of seeing will always be conventional, they can approximate the real world to a greater or lesser extent. However, only *critical realism* achieves a broader, empirically verifiable view of the world by situating agency firmly in structure. "Formulaic realism, in contrast, tends to focus upon a narrow band of human experience centred in institutionalized, heterosexual relationships lent dynamism by a context of contrived, melodramatic action" (Nelson 1997: 120).

So whereas formulaic realism makes *conventional* use of the devices of authenticity developed by critical realism, Nelson suggests that these lose their referential legitimacy in the process. In fact the shaping forces of formulae "preclude them from a fully convincing truth-to-life in the Realist tradition" (ibid. 117). Even if texts can be 'true to life' in the way he describes, Nelson still seems to be overstating the importance of those texts that are by ignoring the different values other texts propose. Focussing on a drama's accuracy of reference simply permits far too literal a frame for evaluating its role in our lives, or as Williams notes:

> ... we as spectators make as strong demands for reference from movies as from other art and communication forms. The directions, the modes and the force of these references vary, exercizing themselves in different ways and in relation to different aspects of film and television works, and of emotional, cultural and social life. We need films to be about life in one

way or another, but we allow them latitude about how they meet this need.

(1994: 282)

If we acknowledge that the potency of narrative could never rest on a claim to absolute truth, one can then argue that in a world of potential information overload, the value of narrative resides instead in its ability to *make a particular sense* of the available facts. It is precisely the difference between these two claims of truth and sense that is rendered immaterial by the postmodernist denial that reference to an external reality has any place in cultural production. Yet the alternative problem with reactionary neo-realism is that it fails to acknowledge that sense-making is sometimes as important as 'truth' – a possibility I will later explore further in respect of myth. Nelson's call for a return to 'truth to life' is motivated by his initial perception of the new affective order that is "increasingly disarticulated, if not quite detached, from the empirical world." (1997:4). However, it is one thing to observe and even lament this trend, and quite another to ascribe it to television, or see dramatic fiction as the key to its reversal. As I noted in the previous chapter, it is misguided to see dramatic texts as the direct causes or prospective solution to a perceived socio-psychic disorder.

The dramatisation in *Warriors* of what contemporary news coverage had previously presented as a series of fragmented and often de-contextualised (if horrific) images, not only makes the events coherent, it restores to them a lost 'human' dimension. There are occasions when television drama is not, and arguably should not, be about the 'bigger picture' but about the smaller one: what it means to lose your home, your family, your limbs. This is also where the whole 'flow' of television discourse comes into play,

because the diegetic logic of this particular drama was neither totalising nor absolute, but one amongst many. The previous weekend, BBC2 had screened *All the Kings Men* (BBC 1999), a glossy drama focussing on the First World War Sandhurst regiment. It was a text that can be read as nostalgic yet critical of the culture of trust that was abused by an establishment who perpetuated a legend of 'disappearance' to cover up how an entire battalion had been unnecessarily sent to a mass and brutal death. The serial theme incorporated in the consecutive scheduling invited comparison with *Warriors,* and without compromising the particularity of either war, this seemed to underline the need for independent ethical interrogation to replace false ideals of patriotism and heroism. More specifically, the second episode of *Warriors* was immediately followed by a studio debate (about issues such as the viability of neutral peace-keeping), the characteristic televisual process that John Ellis dubs "working through". A week after transmission, BBC2 screened a repeat of Leslie Woodhead's documentary *A Cry From The Grave* (1995): a detailed chronological account of how policy and strategy decisions obliged the Dutch UN battalion to evacuate Srebrenica and leave 7,000 Muslim men to their slaughter.

It would be difficult to find a more potent anterior referent than this genocide, which again begs different, but no less vexed, questions of how dramatisation could ever do it justice, and *whose* version of events should be believed. As Corrigan notes:

> History has certainly not ended, but has perhaps only become more resistant to representation and more demanding of a self-conscious agency through which it can be understood and acted upon. (Corrigan 1996: 42)

Like Norris' demonstration of the "suasive techniques" deployed during the gulf War (1992: 189) this shifts the emphasis back to matters of trust in agency, and underlines the degree to which this and other ethical ideals are now part and parcel of aesthetic judgement. Yet, as I shall demonstrate in my later consideration of myth, trust – like sense-making – is not specific to realism.

3:4 Border Zones

The discursive focus on questions of visual truth, narrative form, and conventionalism has tended to overshadow older debates about fact and fiction, thus leaving unresolved one very live controversy about referential texts:

> Senior officers, who have seen tapes of the drama, say they want to avoid a public dispute with the BBC. They are saying that Warriors is so compelling that viewers might treat it as a documentary, as "gospel" as one ministry of defence spokesperson put it.
>
> They suggest that viewers will not be able to distinguish fact from fiction.[23]

Both Nelson (1997: 7) and Mepham (1990: 69) have suggested that 'factive fictions' should be held to account by the same journalistic criteria of balance, integrity, and truth-telling as current affairs programming. However, it is difficult to see how a single all-

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[23] Richard Norton-Taylor, "TV drama comes under fire from army", *The Guardian*, 20 Nov 1999, 7.

purpose set of values could register the fundamental differences between fact and fiction: differences that Branigan (1992) maintains are still clearly demarcated. In order to avoid the two extremes of literal *empiricist* theory or relativist *idealist* theory, Branigan's theory of fiction proposes that it differs from non-fiction primarily in the manner in which it is interpreted. This does not obviate the text, because interpretation takes its cue from known and inscribed codes. Although there is a certain *frisson* to be achieved from the use of say, documentary techniques in fiction (such as the hand-held camera) or alternately, dramatic reconstruction in non-fiction, each form generally adheres to a clearly recognisable set of conventions. For example, *Warriors* deploys familiar enough methods of character exposition in the first twenty minutes or so to make it quite clear what territory we are in, and because of these indicators we can not help but be aware that the narrative is a product of agency. Like all fiction, the drama therefore proposes neither "illusion nor false belief" but instead requires the receiver to connect text and world according to a specific cognitive logic. This logic – that Branigan elaborates in some detail– means that fiction is initially understood as "indeterminate and non-specific", and actively challenges us "to discover what it is about". Furthermore:

> In fiction there is always the possibility that a new referent or description which better fits the text and our presuppositions will be discovered, thus altering its application and truth value. Hence one of the values of fiction resides in its ability to explore the assumptions underlying our presuppositions and to suggest how they could be altered by us to fit, recognize, or create, new situations in the world that we deem important.
>
> (Branigan 1992: 196)

Fiction, in other words, is a useful alternative to science, not just because it makes ideological sense to us, but because it obliges us to extrapolate the sense for ourselves. One reason for choosing to locate an historical representation in what Nichols describes as the 'border zone' between fact and fiction is not so that the factive might substantiate the truth of the fictive, but paradoxically, so that poetic licence might be exploited *without* deceit. The interpretative conventions of fiction make it possible to suggest simultaneously different takes on the underlying dynamics of a given situation as part of a mutually understood (and therefore honest) transaction between speaker and receiver. Far from denying the place of aesthetic emotion, one of Nichols' arguments is that the contemporary world is now so very traumatic that it can only be reflected by poetic, expressionistic means: "it does not fold into a larger historical frame readily. It resists narrativization" (1994: 127). Yet, and acknowledging that "the linear, realist narratives of yesteryear" may not always fully accommodate newly problematised ways of seeing, one can again respond that this is only a problem if we expect them to provide absolutes, rather than regarding a narrative dramatisation as one, specifically fictive, intervention amongst many.

Having freed the 'border zones' from the taint of deception, and reinstated their fictive freedoms, the question is raised as to how this particular aesthetic should be theorised. The grainy, hand-held, *actualité* conventions exemplified by *Warriors* have clear antecedents in both television drama and cinema film, and were first championed by the likes of Bazin and Kracauer. These theorists promoted filmic realism as an ideal photographic form for the revelation of what Jameson cites as 'Being' itself (1992:186).

This phenomenon of 'Being' (with all its inevitably religious overtones) can be de-concealed by an 'Event' that is a momentary coincidence between physical reality and what one might suppose to be an inner existential and/or historical truth.[24] Clearly, this is not a far cry from the documentary-making ambition to expose the hidden truth of a situation through a reflection on its physical appearance. Although apparently 'unmediated', such representation is itself an event, an act of registration of *the* Event selected for the purpose. In application to fiction, such theories or ambitions are clearly limited, primarily because they pay so little heed to story telling and everything else that screen dramas do in addition to visual registration and revelation. Further differences of function and value between documentary and drama will be brought into sharp relief by the example of *Vanity Fair* (see chapter five). This was a serial that did not merely mix the stylistic conventions of *verité* and fiction, but actually used the *form* associated with a particular cycle of mythic narrative in order to achieve the liberal realist *ends* of an exposé - albeit of a fictional world - with results that were predictably uncomfortable and ultimately rather unsatisfactory.

3:5 Artistic Realism

If nothing else, the notion of 'Being' – like that of 'inner truth' -avoids the tiresome assumption that an apparently denotative image automatically makes for a literal epistemological proposition. Yet how might we evaluate such moments of artistic 'truth' without empirical yardsticks? As already discussed, Nelson's defence of some television

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[24] Jameson borrows the sense of Event from Heidegger.

drama is supported by re-stating the original literary and quasi-scientific objectives of the nineteenth century realist movement. For example, he credits the strategy of taking lower class existence seriously, and the portrayal of everyday life, (although notes that these were once delivered with a Chekhovian subtlety that much contemporary fiction lacks). This resurrection of 'pure' realism is quite an interesting gambit, not least because there are indeed some surprising parallels to be drawn between certain dialectical movements in nineteenth century French literature, and similar trends in British drama over a century later. As Auerbach notes, the mid 1850s saw the emergence of an anti-functionalist concept of literary art which denied every kind of use function because "usefulness immediately suggested practical usefulness or dreary didacticism." The retreat from moral, practical or political influence was substituted by the demand that subjects:

> ...be made manifest with sensory vigor and further in a new, not yet outworn form which will reveal the writer's distinctive character. In this attitude (which by the way, admitted no hierarchy of subjects) the value of art, that is of perfect and original expression, was assumed to be absolute
>
> ...
>
> (Auerbach 1968: 503)

The genesis of this trend lay in the strongly felt aversion to the contemporary world of a generation of artists who, despite being "indissolubly connected with the bourgeois society", simply turned away in helplessness. (ibid. 504). In time however, these pure aesthetes were succeeded by what Auerbach describes as "aesthetic realists" such as the de Goncourts who saw artistic opportunity in drawing on poverty and low life for their

raw material. In French theatres around the same time the 'well made play' mutated briefly into the 'problem play' although as Braun notes, this did little to revitalise the essential sterility of the formula or to challenge bourgeois values: "Both formal and social equilibrium were carefully preserved, and the demands of the public were respectfully met" (Braun 1982: 23). Arguably however, what each of these did do was pave the way for Zola to deploy realism to greater social purpose, and (much as Dickens had done in England) to heighten awareness of contemporary issues.

Whether or not one accepts that Naturalism of this sort can be progressive, it is possible to see that in the disaffected aftermath of postmodernism it might once again present an artistic attraction. It is tempting to map mid-nineteenth century French aestheticism onto the 'high' art movements of the later twentieth century, and read parallels with the postmodernist celebration of the free-floating signifier as well as the movement's implicit irritation with worthy didactic paternalism. The comparison is supported by eventual reactions to both, notably the present irritation with either the "rule of gloss" or the surfeit of irony. Arguably, both movements drove themselves into a sterile impasse, propounding an endless circuit of self-referentiality and a divorce from life as most of us live it. In both cases however the problem is not just about reference, but about *relevance* more generally.

Interestingly, and perhaps for good reason, there has been no "Dogme '95" style millennial rebellion by television drama practitioners – no ideological protest at the slick high-cost methodology of mainstream drama production. Admittedly the very bleakness of a serial such as *The Cops* (World/BBC 1999 -) which explicitly eschewed narrative

resolution and consolation, implied a rebellion of sorts. Yet however much it – like *Warriors* – felt like a shot in the arm of day to day genre and quality fare, both serials had as much to connect as distinguish them from the dramatic realist traditions of British television. If there was a revolution going on at the turn of the century, it was actually in non-fiction programming: in the docu-soaps and social experiment serials such as *Paddington Green* (BBC 1999), *Castaways* (Lion/BBC 2000), and *Big Brother* (Bazal/Channel 4 2000). Could these be symptomatic of the "anti-aesthetic" that Jameson predicted as the next stage to follow the realist-modernist-postmodernist dialectic?[25] Arguably, these phenomenally successful hybrids were indeed feeding a desire for apparently less structured and contrived narratives by providing an exposé of life as it is lived by 'real' people, but more importantly, by generating a continual sense that *anything could happen.* It is after all, this sensation of rawness and danger that Dogme films such as *Festen* (1998) were trying so hard to resurrect with their commitment to the "instant" rather than the "whole work". Manifesto rules that forbade special effects, artificial lighting, sets, props, voice-overs and soundtracks, and of course, that insisted on the hand-held camera,[26] were clearly not designed to do away with the conventions of dramatic fiction *per se*. Casting, plot structure and performance were tenaciously preserved (as indeed, they were by *Big Brother*). One of the real achievements of some Dogme films was actually the quality of performance, partly because emotive and storytelling responsibilities were freed from the technological

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[25] One possibility he suggests for such an anti-aesthetic might be a return to "denotive" or "literal" language often associated with theories of documentary, and "from which the illusions of the aesthetic have been expunged, so that the vocation of the epistemological or of knowledge cannot be exercised in some pure and unmediated form." (Jameson 1992: 161)

[26] Along with no directorial credits, no genre films, no futuristic or period settings, and the mandatory use of 35mm film stock, these were collectively branded "the vow of chastity".

has observed, what "identifies a 'realist' innovation in the arts is less the quality of its relationship to an external referent than its place in the history of artistic conventions, its 'inter-textual' relationship to what has preceded." (1986: 127) Because this sort of realism is thus also about novelty and innovation, defending it on artistic grounds does become problematic if the criteria of merit are tied too closely to specific formal or reception attributes. Nelson's neo-realist position is worth returning to briefly here because it exemplifies some of the difficulties involved in over-extending observations born of limited textual critique to an entire category of television output. For example, he laments a trend towards what he describes as the "flexi-narrative" techniques prototyped in *Hill Street Blues* (1980), that evolved out of the commercial realisation that adult quality audiences wanted sophisticated pacey television "which could nevertheless hold the attention of an audience whose powers of concentration were diminished." (1997: 30) One problem he suggests is that by lacking causal resolution, flexi-narrative serialisation makes it difficult to tackle complex issues. Yet however much a psychic comfort the promise of closure might be, strictly speaking the lack of it does not affect the quality of intellectual engagement in any substantive way other than, perhaps, to make interim meanings more important than the denouement. Aside from this, Nelson's other objections to flexi-narrative seem somewhat puzzling, not least because he proposes no value distinction between say, texts which arbitrarily cut from story to unrelated story, and those which deftly bring into play multiple narratives to dramatic and cognitive effect. As a dramatic device, parallel montage (whether restricted to plot and sub-plot, or extended to multiple stories) is particularly well-suited to posit juxtapositions, analogies, and to engage with subtleties of different perspectives and

subject-positions simultaneously. Shakespeare, of course, tended to incorporate an entire alternative cosmic world into his plays that

> often contributes nothing at all or at least very little to the progress of the action, but instead consists in a sympathetic counterpoint – a parallel or contrary motion on various levels of style. There is an abundance of secondary actions and secondary characters which, in terms of the economy of the principal action, could be entirely dispensed with or at least greatly reduced." (Auerbach 1968: 322)

It is also pertinent that this dramatic strategy or "stylistic situation is characteristically Elizabethan and Shakespearean, but it is rooted in popular tradition, and indeed first of all in the cosmic drama of the story of Christ." (ibid. 323)

My intention is not simply to reify popular tradition, nor to belittle historical or qualitative differences, nor to suggest that there is some over-riding majestic continuum from the medieval mystery cycles to *Hill Street Blues*. However, it is important to recognise that differences (not least of value) do not easily boil down to the stripped bones of any techniques that are used. It is not even just a question of skill for, as a study of myth shall reveal, contextual function and potential experience are crucial to understanding what drama is and does. Actually, and for all his latent formalism, Nelson's primary objection seems to be against *pace*, and his essential (and perhaps more legitimate) argument really stems from the lack of opportunities that 'flexi-narratives' provide for reflection. Yet, however sympathetic one might be to this observation, these are still insufficient grounds for discriminating one whole category of realism from

another, perhaps inspiring him later to insist that *the* crucial distinguishing factor is not so much formal, as 'critical'.

The senses in which Nelson intends this concept of 'critical' are not pinned down with any great precision, although he does note that whereas an avant-garde defined by its negation of realism can only ever be a negation, the avant-garde imperative to be critical should be retained as an essential aesthetic objective. Thereafter he seems to deploy the idea in two ways: firstly, to refer to the perspective adopted by the author/text on its own subject matter, and secondly, as the opposite of the 'feel-good' '*divertissements*' that are supposedly craved by receivers. This first of these recalls the liberal realist case for drama in a secular society: namely that it may act as a voice independent of the Establishment and/or any other vested interests, so offering a rival (subjective) view on a prevailing situation.

Although the first sense is defensible for both ethical and socio-political reasons, the second is less palatable and certainly more reactionary. Although hostility to pleasure is not inherent to the term 'critical', and indeed, Nelson dismisses avant-garde interventions as inaccessible, there is no doubt that he is also discriminating between object-texts on the basis of assumptions about modes of subject-receptivity. Again this recalls the liberal imperative to shock by revealing the true harshness of reality: an imperative that is often bolstered by comparison with the lamentably easy 'comforts' and anaesthetic of *Ballykissangel* and the like, demonised by one critic as "the middle-aged, Mondeo-

driving version of guzzling 12 Es on a Saturday night."[28] Similarly, Nelson declares that it is vital that "rigidifying ways of seeing are shaken frequently" (1997: 121), and that we do not "valorize uncritically the pleasure people take from all kinds of popular cultural forms" (ibid. 98). Viewers can and should, he insists, be made more 'mindful'. In this respect, (and despite his acknowledgement that sympathetic emotions have a legitimate part to play) there is little to distinguish the ultimate end of his defence of realism from that of the anti-realist critiques of the 1970s. It reinforces a dichotomy between intellect and feeling that has proved inimical to a more sensitive appreciation of dramatic experience. MacCabe's neo-Brechtianism had reified a crucial difference between the representation of a conflict that the text has already resolved (or assured that it will resolve), and the depiction of a dialectic that demands the audience actively to consider its possibilities for resolution. The motive behind this is made explicit by his insistence that the audience should not be assigned a fixed position in order that "he or she would have to work on the material". The primary objection was never to a partisan text (and never really about truth or fallacy), but to a viewer who is not disrupted or awakened by the process of appreciating the self-same partisan view.

In other words, both theorists perpetuate what Frith identifies as the heart of a high/low distinction that never really concerned "the nature of the art object, or how it is produced, but refers to different modes of *perception*. The crucial high/low distinction is that between contemplation and 'wallowing', between intellectual and sensual appreciation, between hard and easy listening..." (1996:114). In any event, he adds, music experience

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[28] Jacques Peretti, "Weekend TV", *The Guardian* (G2), 27 Sep 1999.

has never been easily mapped on to a high/low dichotomy because there is a strong physical element to even high music appreciation, and "to enjoy music of all sorts is to feel it." (ibid. 115)

There is then, nothing a-political about Nelson's insistence that audiences be made more mindful, and that this should make him an uneasy ally of MacCabe is no more surprising than Kiralyfalvi's (1985) recognition that there is much to connect Brecht with Lukàcs. In all instances, it is the common goal to raise 'consciousness' that provides the bridge between them. However sympathetic one might be to the need for television that is both challenging and insistent, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that for Nelson - like so many others before him – this is not enough, and that he is actually constructing a formal theory to legitimate his hankering for a radical heyday. His model can be read as terribly paternalistic, as a case for a mode of optimum and unambiguous delivery by which audiences might be delivered the messages they most need, yet (and unlike MacCabe) in the clearest and most accessible fashion available. One particular difficulty is that he ignores the fact that to enjoy *drama* "of all sorts" is also "to feel it" and this, not just instruction, is part of its raison d'être. The nagging and uncomfortable supposition with all the more rigid theories of realism and anti-realism is thus that they are motivated by lost –or as yet unseized – power *over* audiences, rather than any sincerely radical aspiration to *empower* or enrich them. Impressive and memorable as *Cathy Come Home* may have been for its original viewers, it is perhaps this hankering for a now lost authority to *change* audiences that is the real reason for its lionisation.

3.6 The Limitations of the Realist Paradigm

This brings me rather neatly back to my earlier observation that 'realism', in spite of all it has stood (and stood in) for over the years, is most accurately defined as a property of politically-motivated discourse. Although as a term, it has been moulded to mean almost anything theorists have wanted it to mean, its longevity is probably due to the insoluble and sincerely troubling nature of the questions many of their arguments have thrown up. In so far as all these complex discourses can be said to amount to a single paradigm, the central problem of that paradigm is perhaps not a matter of the particular shortcomings of any individual position but a question of its overall cumulative effect. The consequence of dwelling on these inter-related, politicised and often intractable issues is quite simply that others have been crowded out, to an extent that is now too obvious to ignore. In the case of programmes such as *JoJo* and *Warriors*, which purport to air contemporary issues or to depict social or historical reality, some items on the agenda are not necessarily inappropriate. The whole point of these texts is their blend of fiction with referentiality, so making questions of ideology, knowledge, transparency, and authenticity, all perfectly legitimate. It is precisely because they do provoke (and indeed strike at the heart of) these questions, and because they often contest other discourses, that they can be so fascinating. As Jameson observes, we need a concept of realism as it is the only aesthetic that implies "the possibility of knowledge" and because we need to embrace the tension between the essentially incompatible claims of art and reality (1992: 158). One solution he proposes for the rejuvenation of a theory of realism is to reverse the stereotype of its relationship to modernism. This would mean ceasing to see realism

as passive duplication in contrast to a more active modernist aesthetic, and instead regarding it as potentially active, even playful. Modernism, by such a reversal, would emerge as a "trained faithfulness" that constrains the aesthetic imagination.

This suggests an interesting prospect but perhaps it is also a mis-diagnosis of the problem for television - after all, the so-called 'realist' conventions of drama serials have long proved resistant to any overtly modernist challenge. Although, as we saw in the previous chapter, the dead hand of modernism continues to prejudice critique, the more specific critical problem bequeathed by the realist paradigm is not just this stereotypical relationship but the active abuse of concepts such as "classic realism". The cliché-d assumptions that lie behind notions of "TV naturalism" do not even address relevant issues about cognition, they simply serve as all-embracing (and almost always pejorative) terms to obviate further examination of the television aesthetic and obscure the complexity, dexterity and variety of dramatic techniques. As Christopher Williams points out, this does amount to a concerted evasion because the teaching of television more generally has also been:

> subordinated to questions of institutions and policy, with problems of aesthetics, communication and consumption taken for granted, barely tolerated or relegated to a sphere of triviality. The ready-made theory of realism, or 'naturalism' to which it was sometime further reduced, lamely filled the gap caused by this lack of interest. (Williams 1994: 291)

Put simply, whether or not a serial aspires to 'represent the real' it does an awful lot else besides. Insightful as it is to expose the constant dialectic of 'convention / realism /

conventional realism / conventionalism', the observation itself obscures all the other use-values and functions that are proposed by texts which might fall into any one of these categories. In the next chapter I shall be arguing that a paradigm of myth can provide a lateral axis that cuts through the linear logic implicit in this dialectical continuum. Myth is not the antithesis of realism because it implies a different set of criteria altogether. It can therefore co-exist quite happily with a realist paradigm, however modified, and indeed both frameworks will be necessary to understand and evaluate contemporary television drama.

The ideal of myth should also provide a viable alternative to what is otherwise the last resort of pragmatic post-Marxist aesthetics, namely to regard realism's stylistic conventions as 'necessary evils'. Nelson, like many others to have contested MacCabe's legacy, ultimately justifies some naturalistic texts on the grounds that attributes such as identifiable characters do make them accessible *and* can accommodate critique. Similarly, Tulloch takes up the 'progressive' realism cudgel to defend the works of Loach and Griffiths, and so stresses the possibilities of radical intervention (1990: 120-126). Yet, and despite a nod to the concept of 'pleasure', the intention of all these counter-positions is clearly not to rehabilitate popular forms, but to substitute an intellectual leftist elitism for the established elitist valences of 'bourgeois' aesthetics. This has always been the rub of much Marxist criticism which looks to celebrate popular culture but cannot conceptualise it in terms outside of the progressive/oppressive paradigm. As Sharratt asks:

> ... if at the heart of much popular entertainment is a *displacement* of the experience of vulnerability and ignorance, and if political art seeks to

> present and analyse the determinants of that experience, how can this be achieved without destroying the very displacement which underpins the popular form being imitated? (Sharratt 1980: 286)

Sharratt also endorses the suggestion that the search for popular political drama on television is itself "a form of political as well as cultural nostalgia" (ibid. 288). This is a key insight, because apart from being politically uncomfortable, the progressive/accessible package only makes sense within the sort of radical and self-certain world view that thinks its visionary and unequivocal goals should be achieved by whatever *realpolitik* methods necessary. As I shall demonstrate further in the next chapter, it is precisely the absence of any such consensual vision that has latterly been a problem for all narratives attempting to dramatise and resolve matters of public order. The fragmentation of the Left into different interest groups, and the equivalent model of art as the property only of the radical margins, can not resolve the problem because it has been partly responsible for it. In the meantime, television fictions can (and often do) serve a very valid expressive function, not least because we look increasingly to them to 'work through' the humanist-ethical dimension of this current 'crisis of values'. As *Butterfly Collectors* and later case studies demonstrate, this working through process very often involves the displacement of 'public' concerns on to a microcosmic assemblage or the distillation of 'serious' issues to a localised inter-personal logic.

If we are to rescue aesthetic discourse from its oblivion, we will need to start respecting certain popular pleasures and collective use-values rather than merely tolerating them. Grossberg has argued that cultural studies itself needs to move beyond models of

oppression and resistance and "towards a model of articulation as "transformative practice', as a singular becoming of a community." (Grossberg 1996: 88). Perhaps we need also to rehabilitate the concept of humanism – not as a secular creed, but as a *given* of dramatic art (which after all, is unthinkable without the possibility of human agency, inter-relationships and individual conscience). In their anxiety to distance themselves from traditional aesthetics, the more extreme screen theorists effectively talked themselves into a corner from which the only logical next step was to object to drama for having people in it, because 'reality' was only comprehensible as some sort of force field of pressures. The deployment of human actors to play out conflicts, whether these are inter-subjective or global-political, can not be anything other than humanist in its common senses (suggesting a concern for human welfare, or prioritising human activity and interests as a paramount and problematic question) because these circumscribe the very genesis of Western drama, even as a religious practice. Brecht's ability to generalise human predicaments and to historicise them within a specific causal structure is still unsurpassed, but all drama operates at a symbolic level, and to suggest that spectators are unable to comprehend realism on those terms is tantamount to arguing that they cannot distinguish life from art. The complaint that television is ceasing to refer to empirical fact rests on a similar tacit assumption, and the idea that life itself has become mere performative spectacle is of course a corollary of this (see chapter two). Localised moral principles (such as tolerance) can inform the normative structure of the so-called bigger picture, and although the public sphere is not reducible to these and these principles alone, human-centred drama can insist that it should never lose sight of them. This is neither denial nor 'dumbing down' because drama has a useful part to play in the pursuit of social *understanding* as well as social change, and its use-value cannot merely

be measured according to its capacity for an already envisioned path of social progress. Television - like its critics - has struggled to keep pace with change, but it has sometimes been more successful than they. If on some occasions, as Nelson suggests, it has resulted in postmodernist affectation without its intellectual critique, or purposeless mimesis without reference, on others it has perhaps stumbled upon new (and sometimes very old) ways of narrativising the world and making sense of it.

CHAPTER FOUR

Dramatic Myth

In so far as I have just described it, the "realist paradigm" of television studies incorporates criteria that are not necessarily wrong, nor even in some cases inappropriate, but we do need to be mindful of their limitations. By failing to register values that lie beyond the paradigm's range of interest, this still dominant set of positions can lead us to miss the point, so to speak, of what so many drama serials have to offer: why and how these are routinely useful, occasionally touch a public nerve, make a lasting impression, and/or simply seem to 'work', even when received aesthetic opinion might militate against them. Dramatic representation can be, and often is, expressionistic, allegorical, metaphoric, symbolic, or microcosmic, and for good or sometimes ill, television drama can collectivise and help construct a public domain. These are all qualities that demand other paradigms, including those that invite reassessment of supposedly negative attributes, and suggest ideals other than those that are essentially didactic, paternalistic, or contrarily self-indulgent.

I would now like to shift approach somewhat, and look at different types of value. It would seem that in order to arrive at a more inclusive set of criteria, we first have to have some concept or flexible model of the role often served by television drama, of the uses it can and does provide. I touched on some possibilities for this in chapter two, and argued that these depend in turn upon a less pejorative model of audiences than those (of self-gratifying consumers) that have increasingly gained orthodoxy. If

we are to justify the belief that television is more than just a palliative for a sick society (critics included) then this process needs to be rooted in a very complex appreciation of use-value, and should recognise that in a social as well as a psychological sense, television drama often operates at a far more contemplative and significant level than many would like to admit. The critical imperative is thus to respect its sometimes quite routine functions, without discarding altogether the higher idealism traditionally associated with concepts of art, culture and use-value.

I propose now to outline a highly selective model of 'Dramatic Myth', not least because many of the qualities that need to be recognised are already well documented by theories of primitive or archaic myth and, as I shall argue, much television drama can productively be seen to function in a similar way. As we shall see, this is neither a new comparison nor an unproblematic one, but it does have unspent mileage. Formulated carefully, myth criticism can be a highly appropriate conceptual framework, yet with television criticism at least, it remains under-used and largely un-debated in the context of aesthetic judgement. Myth can be both good or bad in its ramifications, but the strategic objective of this chapter will be to redeem some of its more positive attributes: not so much to reflect what *all* television drama is like, but to model what it realistically can be. I should stress from the outset that this is not intended to replace all other criteria, nor is it in any way a precise critical methodology. I will first sketch out an abstract ideal of dramatic myth as a confluence of common qualities, but as some of these will need clarification I will then go on to elaborate the sketch and acknowledge the theories and concepts that inform it. In the case studies of specific serials that make up most of chapters five and six I will be deploying and referring back to the qualities that are proposed below. However, as

these later analyses will also draw upon other realist and traditional criteria, they should not be seen as the demonstration of a model but rather as an opportunity to enrich appreciation by recognising the presence of many use-values that might otherwise go unacknowledged.

4.1 A sketch of dramatic myth

Myth narratives are a requisite of all known cultures, and typically serve collective and public functions as well as appealing to common psychic needs. Pierre Maranda offers a succinct definition:

> Myths display the structured, predominantly culture-specific and shared, semantic systems which enable the members of a culture area to understand each other and to cope with the unknown. (Maranda 1972:12)

Like works of art more generally, myth operates a constant traffic between its interior and exterior dimensions. It provides an opportunity for engagement, participation and inter-subjective exchange, so offering an experience of value in itself, as well as insights and possibilities for making sense of the world outside. Any categorical division between these dimensions will always be somewhat arbitrary, but for convenience I will deploy the term "experiential" to refer to involvement and engagement with the text itself, and "cognitive" to characterise its various referential or exterior applications. Perhaps I should stress that cognition can include intuitive and even emotional modes of perception and knowledge acquisition. Indeed a crucial

feature of myth is that it provides a distinctive, even unique, mode of apprehending and understanding the world(s) about us.

Myths are thus 'sense-making' fabrications that can explain the phenomena of experience, although not necessarily according to a linear causal logic. Their referents frequently have no literal and precise equivalents in the external world, although taken in entirety, myths do need to bear some relation (often an analogous one) to lived experience. To do this they make extensive use of metaphor, perhaps at a macro level by constructing a diegesis that is itself allegorical or symbolic of a broader cosmic infrastructure. Like both realist and anti-realist narratives, myths make or imply truth claims but these are most likely to be claims in respect of human behaviour or moral and ethical norms rather than assertions of precise empirical truth. Myths do not pretend to expose realities or to 'tell it like it is' (although they are sometimes misinterpreted as doing just this) and there is no overt pretence at neutrality: myths *always* have an ethical perspective.

So one paradox of contemporary television myth is that although the medium comprises familiar sounds and images to represent people in the time and space of an empirically recognisable world, these are 'mythologised' beyond the point of literalism. This mythologising project is often mis-associated with deceit or idealisation, neither of which is a just or accurate definition. In order to explain and articulate specific existential contradictions and unexplained phenomena - and crucially, in order to fulfil its other essential roles – dramatic myth is often obliged to transpose and even remove (time and space), to displace (because it must resolve broader, often unanswerable moral/cosmic questions) and then to reconstruct (particularly characters as these must

be made 'typical' yet heroic, in a Lukacsian sense). For example, the conceit of 'once upon a time' is a device to hypothesise aspects of the present without the need to make them credible in everyday terms. Similarly, (and particularly in period television dramas – see chapter five) the idea of the past functions not as a reference to specific historical events, but as a self-referential domain, the near equivalent of what Don Cupitt describes as the traditional placing of myth "outside historical time in primal or in eschatological time..." (1982:29). One reason for this is expressive: to probe at the existential enigma that Ricoeur called 'being in time', but to do so by analogy and metaphor. As its title suggests, *dramatic* myth is an evolved, highly performative - and therefore semantically rich - manifestation of mythological narrative.

The other essential roles that are so crucial are, again, both cognitive and existential. Apart from explanation, myths also posit possibility and hint at perfection. This is to say that they nurture dreams of a better world, and sow the seeds of hope: perhaps for a less conflict-ridden public realm or for more harmonious inter-subjective relationships. Either way, the sharing of this hope is collectivising, which links up with the way in which myth characteristically - through rhythm, ritual and seriality – brings people together. These are all visceral, physical and temporal modes of binding with a transient common identity and engaging subjects in an extra-mundane experience. To do this, myth appeals to emotion and even spirituality: it must engage, and it must affect. Frequently, it also invokes a collective cultural memory by scratching at subliminal recollections of all the shared and apparently archetypal narratives that have gone before.

All of this requires that myth be pertinent, timely and open to interpretation and re-use. As Silverstone points out "traditions may change but tradition remains" (1994:21). Myths do not deliver literal meanings to interested intellects but neither do they universalise irrelevantly: instead they supply the raw material for speculation, hypothesis and reuse. In other words, myths are contingent, and because they can be contingently useful, dangerous, insightful or obfuscating, they must also be judged by criteria external to themselves, even though the experience they provide is inherently useful.

4.2 Conceptual and Theoretical Basis

Clearly, the prototypical model of myth that I have sketched out is not a structural model but a functional one. This is a slightly different approach from theories to which I am nevertheless indebted and will draw on extensively: these vary from empirical studies of primitive myth to structuralist accounts of form and significance. Since the 1970s, the theory of myth has attained a certain currency as a tool to analyse popular culture, and has proved useful to explicate underlying meaning (Buxton 1990), to explore totemic systems of visual signification (Rohdie 1969) or to account for the particular socialising role of television in society (Silverstone 1981). Lévi-Strauss' influential work on the structural systems shared by myths from different cultures has proved especially fruitful to genre study: for example, Wright (1975) seminally applied a modified version of Lévi-Strauss' model to the Western, and similar approaches have drawn comparisons with other film or television genres such as detective and crime fiction (see Sparks 1992). Post-structuralist thought has been increasingly resistant to the idea of myth as a fixed model or as the quintessence of a 'pure' genre. The

danger, as Sparks notes, is that we will become "insensitive, failing to register the modulations within genres over time" (1992: 32). Likewise, Buxton insists that Lévi-Strauss' insistence on 'constants' has to be married with a theory of historically specific determinism. Historical factors will very precisely circumscribe the meanings and manifestations of myth, but it does not follow that we can neither define it as a trans-cultural phenomenon nor look for common values. As the theologian Don Cupitt points out:

> There may well be no single feature that every myth possesses, but that is of no consequence provided that the broad family-resemblance among myths in general is sufficiently strong. (Cupitt 1982:29)

The idea of 'family resemblance' helps to balance the need to recognise similarities (between texts, cultures, uses and historical social orders) whilst still acknowledging individual merit, meaning and context. However, comparing primitive myths to modern popular texts is actually quite problematic, and not just because of cyclical variations in meaning. It is because the material conditions of industrial production are so very different from those of archaic societies that many have claimed there can be no such thing as truly "popular" art in capitalist modernity "except under very specific and marginalized conditions" (Jameson 1992: 15). Similarly, Dyer makes a fundamental distinction between "professional entertainment" and "the kinds of performance produced in tribal, feudal, or socialist societies" (1992: 17). Nevertheless, as discussed in chapter two, we need to be equally wary of reducing everything to this one economic/institutional difference of origination, thus over-simplifying the relationship between production factors and artefacts, and obviating

aesthetic evaluation altogether. The tendency to contrast archaic myth with its 'degraded' post-industrial successors is also, to some extent, a Romantic and emotional one, that pertains to a long tradition of so-called "soft primitivism".[1] Indeed, even the ancient Greeks idealised the 'golden age' of the Celtic world lying to their North, and were responsible for the original notion of the 'noble savage' (see Piggott 1975).

Romanticising the 'other' is simply to subordinate it to an expression of our own discontent, which presumes a more monolithic model of our own culture than it deserves. Similarly, emphasising the purist integrity of 'authentic' cultures rather dangerously discriminates against the endemic hybridity of most of the modern world (especially migrant communities), and ill equips us to recognise the differences that can be produced jointly or severally by creative agents (within either tribes or institutions). Tradition and innovation, difference and similarity are in constant dialectic but I will work here with the hypothesis that in spite of all this, the family resemblances or key attributes of primitive myths have near equivalents in television fictions, not least because there are profound parallels in the way they are experienced and used by audiences. For example, according to Lévi-Strauss:

> Myths are anonymous: from the moment they are seen as myths, and whatever their real origins, they exist only as elements embodied in a tradition. When the myth is repeated, the individual listeners are receiving a message that, properly speaking, is coming from nowhere;

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[1] See Lovejoy & Boas (1935) for a distinction between hard and soft primitivism. The latter tends to idealise that which is distanced through time or space.

> this is why it is credited with a supernatural origin. (Lévi-Strauss 1969b:18)

Clearly, we all know that a drama serial is a human, not a supernatural product, but the very collective nature of its production makes it difficult to identify with any individual source. Although in certain chattering circles there will indeed be talk of this director's vision or that writer's style, this is usually subordinate to the more common idea of the cultural product as a collaborative variant. This is most pronounced in the case of those generic episodic series and long-running soaps that tend, if anything, to be associated with the institution responsible for their broadcast. In other words, they are received as un-authored narratives. Whereas institutions are visibly staffed and led by ordinary mortals, they also have a recognisable identity (think of 'Auntie') which transcends the sum of their parts, an observation that squares with the idea of television as a "cultural bard" with specific functions. The very medium itself has been likened to classical bards who were equally central to their particular cultures by dint of the way they articulated the concerns of the day in verse, yet made no claims of authorship. (Fiske/Hartley 1978: 87-89).

The tales that are told also have a cumulative effect, and a consequence of our increasingly "dramatised society" is that audiences are likely to have an abundant 'cultural memory, a whole store of fragmentary recollections born of known stories and past aesthetic experiences that will continually, however hazily, inform reception of new texts. For anyone of a certain age, brought up in what Ellis (2000) describes as the era of broadcasting 'scarcity' (prior to the late 1980s), these memories are also likely to be shared, so representing a common pool of fictive experience. This alone

would account for the explosion of television nostalgia clip shows in recent years. Revivals and literary adaptations have a special place in this process, by drawing not just upon previous television versions, but upon memories born of literary, cinematic and theatrical experiences as well, all of which affords many plots, characters and situations an almost archetypal status. In most costume dramas the 'original' source material is now (by law and tradition) 'public domain', so shifting interest to *how* the tale will be told:

> The adaptation trades upon the memory of the novel, a memory that can derive from actual reading, or, as is more likely with a classic of literature, a generally circulated cultural memory. The adaptation consumes this memory, aiming to efface it with the presence of its own images... (Ellis 1982:3)

The archaic concept of the storyteller seems better to explain this endless process of telling and re-telling than any post-industrial notion of individual authorship.

COGNITIVE USE VALUES

Explanation, Ideology and Truth

> ... myth-making is evidently a primal and universal function of the human mind as it seeks a more-or-less unified vision of the cosmic order, the social order, and the meaning of the individual's life. Both

> for society at large and for the individual, this story-generating function of the mind seems irreplaceable.
>
> (Cupitt 1982: 29)

The idea that the structure of myth might appeal - in some very primal ways - to the manner in which we prefer to think, is key to understanding and valuing it as a cultural prototype. The enormously influential work of Lévi-Strauss was dedicated to revealing an invariant human mind through an exploration of the structural 'laws of myth', although according to Wright this suggests he had "the right approach but the wrong idea" primarily because "his central psychological interest prevents him from considering with care how the myths of a particular society relate to its social actions or institutions." (1975: 19) Nevertheless, Wright also presumes the perennial usefulness of a narrative structure that can provide a "social and conceptual *explanation* to ordinary events." (1975: 15) All narrative is explanatory, but myth is distinctly social in its intent because through its "structure of oppositions" (Lévi-Strauss 1969a) myth describes situations in terms of characters that "represent social types; thus the narrative sequences explain the interaction and relationships of social types" (Wright 1975:128). The re-enactment or 'play' of such relational conflicts makes dramatic myth more complex than an explanatory fable, but its residual preoccupation with the social world also differentiates it from other modes of drama that endeavour to express the private experience of the subjective human condition. Television drama often fuses all these narrative forms and expressive ambitions, but I will concentrate for the time being on its mythological properties.

One characteristic attribute of traditional mythology is that it extends explanation to the universe itself by embedding conflicts within a coherent *cosmic* order. It is therefore both social and existentially philosophical. In fact, it is precisely because they can describe how something came into being that Mircea Eliade has described 'creation myths' (such as Adam and Eve, or Aboriginal "dreamtime" narratives) as the paradigm of mythical thought. (Eliade 1976:16) As I shall later illustrate (in the particular cases of *Nature Boy* and *Our Mutual Friend*) these cosmic infrastructures have post-Darwinian corollaries in the poetic re-affirmation of 'natural' law or in the case of *The Last Train,* in the dramatic re-enactment of a secularised Christianity. It will become clear that myth thus entails metaphysical speculation, although it does not need to ratify itself by reference to a divine presence or other metaphysical absolutes. In fact, the overwhelming imperative seems to be a demand for narrative logic:

> The Romans, like the Greeks, were also particularly interested in aetiology, i.e. accounting for beginnings, the beginnings of rituals, of place-names, of institutions, of cities, of the whole Roman people and its history. This does not mean that they wanted actually to find out how they began, simply to tell a satisfactory story about them. (Gardner 1993: 10)

According to Lévi-Strauss, the explanatory logic of myth "gives man, very importantly, the illusion that he can understand the universe and that he *does* understand the universe. It is, of course, only an illusion." (1978: 17) Whether or not the psychic need to make sense of the world can be dismissed for this reason, it is clear that the explanatory power of myth makes it inherently ideological, which means that

it might also be used to legitimate and therefore sustain an oppressive moral order. As Gardner notes, the ancient Romans certainly suppressed alternative accounts of other Italian peoples in order to privilege their own history and civic ideology. In a reversal of his previous claims, Silverstone (1994:167) admits his earlier mistake in actually opposing myth to ideology and concedes that myths "like so much in culture, are Janus-headed". Moreover, "the form and content of a mythology of a given society can only be sustained within an ideology, and through ideology the particular values of dominance – coded – encoded – disguised - will be represented." For all its concessions, this is an ethically neutral observation, because whether a myth or an ideology is positive or negative depends upon specific factors beyond either form or trans-cultural functions. It thus contradicts the innately pejorative idea that a myth is at heart a lie: a common sense idea with theoretical equivalents that need to be considered briefly.

Possibly the most influential theorist of myth as *essentially* deceitful was Roland Barthes, whose foremost assertion was that "myth today" is actually "a type of speech" or linguistic form – a radical premise that enabled him to conflate visual advertisements with other written or verbal narratives. Crucially, his analyses rest on the observation that mythical concepts are a *distortion* of the pre-existing meanings of the signs that myths re-deploy as signifiers. The thesis being that myth is a second level semiotic system whose principal strategy is to *naturalise* (rather than to obscure, or conversely, to present as explicit) its own concept, thus disguising formal logic as factual causality. It is, he argues, "a type of speech defined by its intention .... much more than by its literal sense .... in spite of this, its intention is somehow ... *made absent* by this literal sense..." (Barthes 1956:112). There is a certain irony here, not

least because in spite of his self-justifying claim to objective semiotic analysis, his deductions are actually determined by the *a priori* and somewhat rhetorical definition of myth as a formal strategy of mystification. Analysing a single image or a thirty-second advertisement is also a de-valorising ploy, because it makes it rather more difficult to balance its inevitably ideological dimension with a broader and more complex appreciation of its other essential functions. Unlike extended narratives, the creation of instant marketable meaning simply has not the time, the motive or the wherewithal to build, persuade, and move its recipient in a way that could create the type and intensity of experience that demands recognition.

Most importantly however, Barthes' formalist characterisation of myth rather dangerously over-simplifies the idea of *truth*, and in this respect he annexes himself to a long-standing continuum. The academic study of myth actually dates back to the late eighteenth century when it flowered alongside the newly emergent social sciences, very much in the context of imperialism. The presumption was that in primitive societies, myths were proposed and received as absolute truth, which inspired Victorian anthropologists such as Andrew Lang to present mythical thought as a symptom of a childlike state of animistic civilisation and retarded development, and so to compare it unfavourably with the intellectual reason of Western religion (see Cupitt 1982: 28). In the early nineteenth century, the appearance of 'heretical' studies of the Gospels *as myths* gave rise to the idea that once identified a myth must be rejected, and so to the presumption that myths can only be of value so long as their claim to an external (in the case of religion, a metaphysical) truth remains unshaken. In modernity however, myth took on more complex connotations, embodying the period's essential ambiguities of romanticism and reason. As Eagleton reminds us, the

'savage mind' always had "a particular importance for cultural modernism" because it was also used to shore up a sense of civilisation as innate common-sense, as that which is "bred in the bone rather than conceived by the brain" (2000: 28). This, he adds, is to "have one's theoretical cake and eat it, finding in these 'primitive' cultures both a critique of such rationality and a confirmation of it." (ibid. 29)

The early association of mythological thought with religious belief is quite instructive, because just as the latter has proved, quite evidently, resilient to Darwinian naturalism, so too might myth continue to operate and so be regarded as valuable in its own right. As Cupitt notes, Western orthodoxy by the end of the twentieth century had come to regard religion as "all husk myth and ritual all the way through", and adds:

> It now looks as if it is a mistake to suppose that religion needs to be justified from outside by being set upon a firm foundation of metaphysics and epistemology. Religion no more needs that sort of justification than does art..... In the end a religion is not so much a metaphysical system as a spiritual path, an ethic, a group of ideals and a way of seeing life; and as such it is something that must be chosen just for its own sake. (1982: 36-38)

In his desire to extend critical hermeneutics to religious study, Cupitt overlooks the tremendous influence that deconstructionist projects have had on aesthetics – Barthes being a case in point. However, the implication is the same for each: the perceived limits of rationality and the absence of inviolable referents makes the imperative to expose 'the real truth' both impossible and redundant. As Coupe observes, as the

Barthesian approach can offer nothing more positive "it has to be seen as a variation on demythologization, propounding its own myth of mythlessness." (Coupe 1998:157). Like the relativist de-stabilisation of reality - the extreme scepticism of which bequeaths realism a purely negative, deconstructivist project (see chapter three) - Barthes' theory leaves us only with a perpetual need to expose and unmask everything as myth. Yet a rather different approach is possible if the explanatory power of myth is not seen as part of a Manichean project, but understood in terms of contingency and function. We need only to recognise that for a myth to be effective as a myth, it must make some credible claim to observations grounded not by absolutes or scientific evidence, but by the various "truths" of lived and shared experience. According to John Mepham, the very nature of modern societies and the absence of any one Truth or grand narrative, means that "we need and can use as many little narratives as we can get our hands on" (1990: 62) The critical obligation shifts then from the need to demythologise (the claim to expose the real truth), to a need to celebrate interim use-values and adjudicate the ethics of truth-telling. It is not the form taken by myths that must needs be policed, but the content they propose and counter-propose, not least because they are never the last word on the matter. Contesting stories is an integral part of the mythological process, because it is part of the constant re-negotiation and re-telling of myth.

Admitting the limits of both consensus and diversity as dogma, this would seem to demand an acknowledgement that truth can sometimes be strategic, not least because there are numerous examples of rich cultural traditions and complex societies that have been founded on myth. Simon James' timely account of the fallacy of a single Celtish ethnic identity proves just that: there was certainly no such single race, but the similar

circumstances of various peoples of the British Isles still made the construction of a sense of indigenous identity a potent counter-weapon to the threat of upper middle-class notions of 'Englishness' from the eighteenth century onwards. Such myths may still have a bone fide role to play in the assertion of both difference and solidarity, and they can not always be measured against the truth of history. Perhaps, as Wallace Stevens famously argued in defence of poetry:

> We have been a little insane about the truth. We have had an obsession. In its ultimate extension, the truth about which we have been insane will lead us to look beyond the truth to something in which the imagination will be the dominant complement. (Stevens 1951: 39)

Myths are not lies, they are somewhat oblique ways of expressing the truths of experience above the evidential truth of events. For all its deployment of *actualité* techniques, *Warriors* was also mythological in its aspiration to express a collective experience of war, and not just a methodical historical chronology. Evaluating such a text demands the criteria of both myth and realism, and it no longer makes any sense to pit emotion against reason. There are caveats of course, but if a myth is shown to be palpably fallacious - or manifestly injurious to the conflicting and perhaps more pressing truths of others' experience - then it can be pierced or countered. James, for example, justifies questioning the fashionable Celtic identity myth partly on the grounds of new archaeological evidence, but also because he sees recent wars in Eastern Europe as a warning against resurgent nationalisms within the U.K. These 'ethnic chauvinisms' include newly nascent hostility towards 'Anglo-Saxon'

Englishness[2] that are reminiscent of the hardening of ethnic positions that preceded and exacerbated the Bosnian conflict. As it happens, the bewildering and terrifying nature of the latter experience is well demonstrated (if not fully accounted for) by the human interest storyline of *Warriors* itself. By analogy, the acres of newsprint recently devoted to the supposed Millennial crisis in English identity, seems to suggest that it is new collectivising myths, and not the old historical 'truths' of conflict, of which we now have most need. Accepting that history belongs to the victors, one might add that the myths of say, Scottish and Welsh oppression belie the degree to which the 'assimilated' English (Celts and other races, and of course, the working classes) have been consistently oppressed in their own country, yet all too often are demonised (by 'outsider' myths) as inter-changeable with their own oppressors. There is much 'historical' evidence of this cultural marginalisation, but relatively few galvanising myths or resurrected local heroes.

Metaphor and Seriality

The process of mythologisation is thus often an attempt to get beyond surface realities and to speculate and hypothesise about their broader (and necessary) meaning, and in this it is comparable to traditional concepts of 'artistic truth'. In order to achieve this level of signification, myths usually work at a metaphoric level.[3] Metaphor is discursively crucial to human epistemology and social understanding because it is a

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[2] Quite apart from the political dangers of basing any national identity on a prior claim to the land, James crushes some of its validity by pointing out that large communities of early Britons almost certainly survived the so-called Anglo-Saxon 'invasion' of England.

[3] see for example, Lévi-Strauss (1969a: ch. X) "The effectiveness of symbols".

way of both 'naming the unnamed' and 'naming the unnamable', and so:

> ... by presenting one object in terms of another, is able to identify certain characteristics of the first for which no terminology has been coined. (Whittock 1990:17)

An idealist, or as Hausman puts it, an "originativist" approach also proposes that some metaphors "can create unique insights and that these metaphors are irreducible with respect to the antecedents in their contexts" (Hausman 1989:24). Even a modified, "non-reductionist" approach requires a corresponding recognition that the metaphoric work of art can serve a purpose for which there is no adequate substitute. Acknowledging the metaphoric potential of myths and television dramas is thus a tacit admission that they can not be interchangeable with other types of consumption or modes of cognition.

As Branigan notes, all narrative makes some use of "fuzzy concepts" of understanding that are not fully accounted for by deductive and inductive processes (1992: 9), although effective metaphoric myths go beyond this. Conversely, it has to be recognised that many television dramas *do* operate at a very literal level: they can be prosaic, rudimentary and often depend upon a very simple causal and over-explicated plot. Although there is always some scope for speculative reinterpretation in spite of this, such use-potential can not really be described as a quality proposed by the text itself. This is because some metaphors are potentially more powerful than others, which can become tired clichés and so lose their charge: in fact some television metaphors and metonyms are now so routine they have become part of its prosaic

vocabulary.[4] Recognising the dangers of exhaustion therefore makes it possible to form evaluative discriminations on the same basis, and in chapter five I shall give examples of texts which attain a richer level of signification. I would stress that metaphoric originality should not be equated with formal innovation: it is possible that a very potent metaphor might be accommodated within strategies of narrative repetition or seriality. Nor can richness be mapped on to intellectual complexity because much like television fictions, the primitive cycles of mythology documented by Lévi-Strauss make clear that "it is not directly linked with a different kind of reality, which is endowed with a higher degree of objectivity than its own", the point being that "it might therefore transmit to minds that seem perfectly free to indulge their creative spontaneity." (1969b:10).

Elsewhere, Lévi-Strauss compares the "lowest forms" of myth (in their most exhausted and degraded episodic state, to the serial romance - "the final state of degeneration in the novel"(Lévi-Strauss 1968). This implies that cyclical structures are worthless once stripped of their original meaning, and it is probable that in this respect, he is not only perpetuating the established dichotomy between the pre-modern and the modern, but endorsing received aesthetic wisdom that has fetishised the value of originality. As noted previously, Umberto Eco (1985) has challenged this opposition, arguing that seriality was more legitimate in classical aesthetics than modernity ever acknowledged, and that we still know too little of the history of repetition to disregard it so easily.

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[4] See Fiske/Hartley (1978: ch 3) for a semiotic analysis of these devices.

The clear value distinction proposed by Lévi-Strauss also appears paradoxical given his previous testimony that all myths are reiterative. The repetitious qualities of myths in their presumably dynamic stage are structurally no different to those of the formulaic romance, and in both cases as Radway (1987) has illustrated, it is the familiarity of the recurrent schema that provides much of the pleasure. On the other hand, it is clear that, like metaphors, cycles of myth and genres can become spent: they lose energy and popularity, ideas become hackneyed, artistic movements become tired. They find new ways to regenerate themselves for the world they inhabit: for example, romantic novels may not go out of fashion but, like costume dramas, they have undoubtedly become more erotic. 'Exhaustion' may thus have less to do with formal or intellectual originality than relevance. Hausman argues that metaphor creates its own significance by designating "a unique, extralinguistic and extraconceptual referent that had no place in the intelligible world before the metaphor was articulated." (1989: 94).[5] But could this 'uniqueness' not be the product of an unpredictable serendipity, the way in which at certain times in certain places, the confluence of all three stages hits a certain nerve within the realm of common experience? In her study of theatrical revivals, Griswold (1986: 7-9) conceives the four-sided relationship between world, artist, cultural object and audience as a "cultural diamond", so as to emphasise the constant dynamic of these variable relationships. As experiences change, old insights can become fresh again: which is precisely why even hackneyed song lyrics can sometimes seem eerily profound during an emotional crisis. The metaphor becomes a cliché only when it ceases to propose an insight into that which is newly recognisable,

[5] This is partly a reworking of the Aristotelian proposition that metaphor goes beyond analogy by effectively *transforming* the first discursive object or idea by expressing it in terms of the second . In I. A. Richards coinage these are respectively the 'tenor' and 'vehicle': see *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (Oxford University Press, 1936).

and once circumstances have stabilised, or rather once they have been worked through and made intelligible - so that we have psychically readjusted ourselves - then the metaphor (or myth, or genre) is no longer so useful. This is a partial reversal of the axis of traditional aesthetics, of the idea that art is an original expression of universal truth, because myths evolve to express changing realities. Metaphor may be important within recurrent schema because it "involves the effort to adjust our preset and customary ways of thinking to the startling new aspects brought to light by the metaphor" (Whittock 1990:8), but it is not necessarily because the metaphor is new but because our ways of thinking have ceased to marry up with the world about us. The same argument could explain the re-generation of genres at particular times. We would have no need of insight if the world was always, already intelligible: indeed, we would have no need of myth if there were such things as universal truths.

Utopia

> So, out of the darkness of the world that is, into the light of the world that could be and must be. A world purged of its ancient greeds, a world in which dreams are not empty or sacrifices in vain. A world of infinite promise which the unconquerable spirit of man will someday forge into fulfilment.[6]

Jameson's theorisation of the Utopian instinct of popular culture has been highly influential, not least because his idea of the 'political unconscious' proposes it as a

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[6] Closing voice-over to *The Stars Look Down* (Carol Reed, 1939)

more legitimate aspect of "the effectively ideological".[7] It can express the aspiration of the text to transcend the very same social divisions that it officially (or formally) enforces, or as Coupe puts it: "No matter how far a particular literary text might seem to be committed to preserving the status quo, it can always be read with a view to the potential of the not yet" (1997: 176). Coupe also points out that Jameson's adherence to "the myth of deliverance" leads him to look for possibility mainly at the point of narrative resolution. In turn, this inevitably privileges the mechanism of closure and foregrounds those texts that ultimately suggest an alternative *public* moral order that might obviate the conflicts that have been enacted. Actually, this is not the only Utopian dimension of many texts (including, of course, all those that lack closure), but I will address it first. In postmodernity, resolution which proposes a tangible social solution has often been regarded as untenable because of the collapse of the so-called 'grand narratives' (such as Marxism) that once seemed to offer answers. Which is to say that myth, although an essentially ideological form, now inhabits a Western world that professes itself to be post-ideological and which, through its insistence on rigour and rationality, has little to fall back upon other than science and a secular ideal of nature. The problem, particularly with science, is that although it now gives us "almost the only objective knowledge we have, it does so only at the price of not giving us the meaning we seek, and so its ability to rescue us from our present cultural crisis is zero." (Cupitt 1982:127)

The transposition of time and space in period or futuristic drama is one possible

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[7] Jameson insists the Utopian and the ideological cannot be separated because at one extreme, this would entail an over-emphasis on the "manipulatory function" of mass culture, or at the other, it would be "myth criticism at its most academic and aestheticizing" because it would simply abstract texts from their semantic, social and historical contexts. (in 1992: 30)

mechanism for circumventing the exigencies of practical 'realist' political solutions to contemporary problems, so allowing the narrative satisfactions of clear resolution. In many cases, even these have tended to displace the possibility of *public* utopia on to inter-subjective promise. If we take *Middlemarch* (BBC, 1994) as an example, we can see how narrative incidents and establishing shots are used selectively in the first episode to emphasise the advent of progress and reveal a world in the grip of change. The stories of Dorothea and Dr Lydgate are developed in parallel, positing them as comparable examples of attractive and dynamic young people, determined to make their mark in society. Many trials and tribulations later, episode six closes after they have become reconciled to their own limitations, and indeed to those imposed by societal structures. However, a narrator's voice concludes with a promise of a better public order – one that depends upon the unrecognised contribution, and the "unhistoric acts" of individuals "who live faithfully their hidden lives, and rest in un-visited tombs." Because of the period setting, this is less a matter of ideological prescription for the way things ought to be, than a selection from the past of activities worth preserving for the future. Hope, it seems, can not spring from nowhere. In the face of difficult or unjust circumstances, the value of human social existence (much like 'public spirit') can be sustained, as it often has been, by inter-personal duty and kindness. Similarly, as I will later illustrate, both *Our Mutual Friend* (BBC, 1998) and *Nature Boy* (BBC, 2000) dramatise (very different) configurations of a nature/society conflict, and although each resolves this according to its own metaphoric logic, the promise and possibility in both cases depends upon human love and compassion.

Cupitt reminds us that Christianity continued, rather than supplanted, a secular tradition by challenging the previous oppressive religious and social order with a more

humane alternative. Citing contemporary examples of sincere altruism as a reason for continued faith in human nature, he argues that if all experience is seen as pure gift, and the Nietzchean will-to-power is recognised as necessary "to give substance to human relations", then the conditions may eventually be right for a new kind of moral reality to emerge. (1982:137/8) This is not an exclusively Christian approach, and as illustrated in my earlier discussion of Eagleton, Cupitt is not the only one to seek refuge in a qualified idea of human nature and human values. The latter is not necessarily a liberal apology for the status quo, but if this truly is a post-ideological age, these could well be the only moral benchmarks that remain constant during a period of "re-norming"[8], so making the displacement of the public on to the inter-subjective a mythological necessity.

If we accept the inevitability of this we are confronted by two further imperatives. Firstly, an assessment of textual resolution must make a value distinction between such necessary displacements and other, more blatant evasions or evacuations. Certainly, there are many instances where, for want of a credible solution, a text has evaded the mythic function altogether, and I have already given Buxton's (1990) example of how *Miami Vice* opted for gratuitous stylistic play to disguise its inability to resolve represented oppositions. Deliberately dramatising contradictions only to evacuate them generates a sense of hopelessness that simply closes off the process of hypothesis. I would not suggest there is no room on television for detached critique or even exposé, but as myths are essentially sense-making fabrications, they can not just jeer from the sidelines. Using the form of myth but refusing its imperatives is not "truth-telling", it is fictive power without responsibility because it sets up the teller's authority but

[8] See Fukuyama (1999: 55 - 80)

absolves itself from having to work though questions. The endless picking over of prevailing anxieties is a good example of how contemporary crime fictions continually rise to the challenge of possibility via the process of working through. Although many such texts can encourage fear (Sparks 1992) they rarely obviate it through dismissive contempt, and frequently offer hope vested in the integrity of the ordinary/maverick detective hero.

Secondly, understanding that all art presently operates within a wider value vacuum suggests a need to be more pragmatic about its goals as well as its responsibilities. Conor's reading of Jameson interprets utopian hunger (for collective unity) as co-extensive with the aspiration to emancipate use-value from exchange-value by surpassing it. The problem inherent in Jameson's own critical analyses is that its:

> ... net result is also to show how impossible such an overcoming must be. Afflicted by the division of value from life, the text can only crave elaborately for their rejoining..... The value of this work, even on its good or utopian side, can be read only as negative prolepsis, as value-towards-value. (Conor 1992:151)

This brings us back to the problem discussed in chapter two which is that transcending exchange value altogether would put us in a universe of "absolute inertness or valuelessness" (ibid. 153). In the meantime, television myths must often deal with the practical moral conflicts of social and collective experience, and they frequently do so serially, that is without closure. However, if we discount the 'myth of deliverance' that demands so much emphasis on closure, it is possible to read intermittent impulses

of utopian aspiration pragmatically, and see these as worthy of celebration in themselves. Dyer notes of entertainment that it does not necessarily offer a model of how a utopian world might be organised, but tends instead to present how it might *feel*. It "thus works at the level of sensibility" by using non-representational signs (such as colour, rhythm, movement, and camera work) as well as signs that are more evidently representational. (Dyer 1992: 18). This is a more effective insight into the way serial fictions work, not least because although in its shorter forms, ultimate closure is achieved and *does* matter, the on-going subtext of possibility will always far outweigh the simple truths of the literal destination. Moreover, if we emphasise that serial narratives (as myths) can make an important appeal to the way in which our social psyche functions, then we can better appreciate that the seeds of *fantasy* for a better world are of both cognitive and experiential use. 'Escaping' reality throws its validity into question, and actively nurtures the desire for change. As Coupe concludes his own study: "the myth reminds us that there is always something else, something 'other', to be said or imagined." (1997: 196). Set against the destructive nihilism of much modernist (and postmodernist) art, the mythology of television drama serials – particularly in its costume, epic or poetic manifestations – often assumes responsibility for the provision of hope. Inevitably, it will also help to shape the particular historical guise to be assumed by that hope, but as Dyer admits, the very process of drawing attention "to the gap between what is and what could be, is, ideologically speaking, playing with fire." (1992: 26).

If Cupitt is correct in supposing that society can survive the loss of belief in a divine power so long as people still believe in the social value of the myth, then this would also seem to undermine the value distinction often made between old sacred myths,

and secular successors that are "*emptied* of their religious values and functions, but preserved for their epic or fantastic qualities." (Eliade 1976: 39 - my italics). Such myths are still serving at least one basic function which is to challenge the absolute nihilism of the 'will to power' with the will-to-dream. In any event, reassessments of some bodies of ancient myth have suggested that the assumed 'sacred' dimension was often less important for its own sake than for the functions it served. For example, although ancient Greek myths are often characterised by the centrality of the Gods, in ancient Rome "stories about the Gods were unimportant; religion's function was to maintain a stable relationship between the Gods and the state, and Rome's past success was its justification." (Gardner 1993:7) In other words, a sense of shared history (real or imagined) took on the pivotal responsibilities of explanation, yet the end objective - of binding and consolidation within the public sphere – remained constant.

Mutual Sincerity

Like all fictional narratives, myths propose a transaction that is governed by codes and conventions, and these are vital because for myth to be effective as myth, it has to be a convincingly shared experience. This is not dependent on viewing context, as the sense of public participation engendered by television drama is possible even if you watch alone. This may well make it essentially vicarious, but it is fundamental to mythological meaning and pleasure, and it also requires a certain level of understanding and trust in the transaction between storytellers and receivers. So although objectively, a wide diversity of interpretations may be possible, subjectively one's own reading must seem to correspond with the intended one: a deliberate

'reading against the grain' is to some extent a rejection of the whole transaction. Thus myth also requires an order of belief in its essential sincerity, which is similar to John Corner's suggestion (1995) that television's 'seeing and knowing' capacity involves a basic "investment of self". In the particular case of drama, this may be encouraged by identification with a single protagonist, but given their collectivising impulse dramatic myths are more likely to propose a range of subject positions with whom empathy is possible. All of these tendencies sit somewhat uneasily with encoded (or viewer) subversion, either of which would undermine the fragile conviction that the myth is a shared phenomenon. The danger, particularly with the type of postmodern irony that mocks codes and conventions, is that it can also seem to mock the viewer:

> I'm not sure I get the 'new irony'. Not even sure what it is. Or even if it's that new. Or ironic. It's this post-modernism thing, right? Things aren't what they seem to be except they really are, because, well, don't ask, because, you know, it's too clever for you.[9]

"Clever" subversion misunderstands that there is a limit to how fast and loose one can play with audience expectations, because its operation usually sabotages the use-values that are the text's main reason to exist. If the critical reification of such postmodernist staples as parody, and irreverence seem to have no place in serious drama it is not just because the natural home of these devices is comedy, but because as benchmarks of worth they only make sense if one accepts that a perpetual imperative to demythologise is paramount. Deceit also comes in to it if a text does

[9] Kevin Mitchell, "They can't mean me", *The Observer* (Screen), 16 Jul 2000, 2.

not take itself or its audience seriously, and so corrupts the mythological transaction itself.

EXPERIENTIAL USE-VALUES

My initial sketch of dramatic myth gave equal weight to its cognitive and experiential values, and it should now be apparent that sensibility informs cognition and vice vesa. Because myth is a participatory activity it can not be measured entirely by criteria of literal representation or reference, in fact even Lévi-Strauss - for all his insistence on 'scientific rigour' -found it necessary to draw on emotive and analogous concepts to explain his empirical findings. Indeed, he introduces *The Raw and the Cooked* as a "myth" of mythology.

Rhythm and Ritual

The repetitious qualities of archetypal tales, conventions and serially developed narratives, are often dismissed as the 'solace' of familiarity (the world fits a pre-existing mental model), but they can also strike a more visceral note. In his "Overture", Lévi-Strauss makes a fairly complex digression into the parallels between myth and music, arguing that mythology actually "occupies an intermediary position between two diametrically opposed types of sign systems – musical language on the one hand and articulate speech on the other..." (1969b: 27) Yet the experience of myth can also approximate that of music, a form with the "extraordinary power to act simultaneously on the mind and the senses":

Just as music makes the individual conscious of his physiological rootedness, mythology makes him aware of his roots in society. The former hits us in the guts; the latter, we might say, appeals to our group instinct. And to do this, they make use of those extraordinarily subtle cultural mechanisms: musical instruments and mythic patterns. (1969b: 28)

Space does not permit a full discussion of all the recent and complex debates about identity, but what I would like to explore a little further is the manner in which the temporal experience of the serial can generate an emotional sense of belonging and shared experience. Lévi-Strauss' argues that underneath

> the level of sounds and rhythms, music acts upon a primitive terrain, which is the physiological time of the listener ... Because of the internal organization of the musical work, the act of listening to it immobilizes passing time; it catches and enfolds it as one catches and enfolds a cloth flapping in the wind. It follows that by listening to music, and while we are listening to it, we enter into a kind of immortality. (ibid. 16)

Despite some elaborately detailed differences (operation at the level of *visceral* time is more essential to music), mythology also facilitates this sense of immortality. Like music, it works on the basis of a double continuum: external (the selection of events from a supposedly historical, infinite series, and similarly a selection from all the available physically producible sounds), and internal (the "psychophysiological time of the listener" which incorporates "cerebral waves and organic rhythms, the strength of the memory and the power of the attention"). This is similar to his earlier argument

that the act of listening to a myth makes considerable demands on the receiver's creative mental agility, which is broadly in line with current cognitive thinking (such as Branigan's (1992) model of narrative schema) that has done so much to contest the association of physical inactivity with mental passivity. However these ideas have tended to play down the very pleasures of surrender that Lévi-Strauss sees fit to celebrate, for he goes on to compare both myth and the musical work to the conductor of an orchestra, "whose audience becomes the silent performers". A conductor is very much in control, indeed it is precisely on the skilled execution of this power that aesthetic enjoyment, temporal and emotional *engagement* all depend:

> ... this multiplicity of excitements and moments of respite, of expectations disappointed or fulfilled beyond anticipation – a multiplicity resulting from the challenges made by the work and from the contradictory feeling it arouses that the tests it is subjecting us to are impossible, at the same time as it prepares to provide us with the marvellously unpredictable means of coping with them. (1969b: 17)

There is a rather striking contrast between his effusive language and the terminology of television analysis which would traditionally characterise this degree of emotional involvement as symptomatic of the medium's 'manipulative' power. Experiential criteria (from boredom to euphoria) are central to the way in which we all routinely evaluate any cultural activity, and one of the advantages of myth criticism is that it is significantly less hostile to emotional engagement than purely cognitive paradigms tend to be. In other words, the value of myth depends upon operation at a sensory (or hyper-sensory level). Arguably, there is nothing manipulative about voluntary

surrender to the magic of the dramatic myth, and the idea of rhythmic patterns – repetitions, evoked, implied – well expresses the very particular visceral pull of serials. These patterns do not merely reassure by ordering content into an *a priori* schema, but arouse a sense of participation which like music, can help to bond viewers in the shared project of 'coping' with new phenomena of experience.

Beyond these textual rhythms lies a temporal infrastructure of ritual and routine within which television as an institution has assumed a central role. Silverstone elaborates the place of television in everyday life by reference to concepts of both sociological and psychoanalytic derivation. From Anthony Giddens he cites trust and 'ontological security' as the necessary prerequisites (and products of) active engagement in the world and everyday life. In modernity, Silverstone suggests, these inherently emotional requirements are increasingly bridged by the media, particularly television which defines and sustains the routines of "habit, seriality, framing" (1994:8) In addition, he takes D.W. Winnicott's theory of object relations and maps this on to television, which becomes, according to his characterisation, a transitional object occupying the space that first arises as a result of the infant's separation from the mother. This has a social as well as a psychic dimension because early experiences of this space influence the subject's ability to become a social agent. *Symbolic* understanding is fundamental here because the "symbols of daily life" such as "the highly charged and intense private and public rituals in domestic or national rites of passage or international celebrations" are also "our attempts, as social beings, to manage nature, to manage others, and to manage ourselves. They have their roots in the individual's experience of the basic contradictions of social life..." as well as in our collective experiences and demands for interaction, the sacred, structure, myth and

ritual. (ibid.19) These are all means of managing the recurrent dialectic of anxiety and security.

Importantly, Silverstone also warns of the danger of reducing television to the level of biological necessity as this might encourage the idea that it is somehow immutable and "invulnerable to criticism". He later returns to this question of value, rejecting the dichotomies of control/freedom, activity/passivity for posing the wrong questions, not least because all of these oppositions are always in constant tension. Identities, like rituals, are "both found and created within a shared, often disputed and always highly differentiated social space." (ibid.164/5) The imperative, he adds is really to "understand engagement" which might:

> be weak or strong, positive or negative in its implications. But it is, in the sense in which I have identified it, always dynamic, and dynamic in the specific social sense of agency. (ibid.170)

Evaluating the nature and relative qualities of fictive engagement is clearly a different exercise to rejecting 'illusion' on the grounds that immersion is not conducive to thought, and in turn this allows us to conceive the *extra-temporal* and *extra-spatial* dimensions of myth in a more positive light. By mythologising time and space, myths can take us beyond our own as part of a routine which is potentially both cathartic and insightful. 'Escape' is not a particularly accurate way of describing this process, precisely because the nature of the myth is intimately connected to the specific inadequacies of our actual time and space. Silverstone argues that the real question should concern the 'ordinariness' of everyday life:

Mythic forms of communication, often recounted in highly charged ritual times and spaces, clearly demarcated the more or less sacred times from the secular ordinariness of everyday life. Yet they could be considered as always part of the everyday, by virtue of their capacity both to reflect and reflect upon the everyday.... they generated the forms of culture which could then be seen to be incorporated through more practical or mundane attitudes and behaviours into the daily round. The 'sacred' spaces occupied by the media have this quality, and our relationship to them reinforces it. (1994:167)

This blurring of the divide between the mundane and the extra-mundane helps to explain how dramatic myth can operate outside of 'reality' without denying its existence. It also resists the dichotomy between 'authentic' rituals and those which have been appropriated by television, often for commercial ends. Television as an institution developed hand in hand with post-war demand for consumer durables, and for this it is often attributed a determining role in the commodification of social life. At *worst*, claims Dyer, "entertainment provides alternatives *to* capitalism which will be provided *by* capitalism." (1992: 25) However, as already argued, the need for alternatives is often more strongly expressed that the pat, superficial solutions implied at a literal level. Besides, appropriated rituals do not disguise or devalue the basic pre-existing need for them, a need that can still find complex expression in the very forms that would reduce it to more material ends. This has been dimly grasped by BBC strategists who have sought to market the Corporation's unique appeal at times of national crisis (the death of Princess Diana), and major sporting or other events that are clearly not constructed by television, although shaped by its mediation.

The supposed surfeit of tribal emotion engendered by events that seem to touch a nerve has come in for much criticism of late, not least because as Will Hutton recently observed "shared emotion is a poor substitute for reasoned public purpose" or solid communities.[10] More extreme still, the anti-paedophile lynch-mobs that accompanied the outpouring of mass grief over the death of Sarah Payne would seem to suggest a more insidious side to the tapping of latent group feeling.[11] But this phenomenon does not discredit grief per se, and no more should it justify the rejection of any kind of community-binding emotion: the aesthetics of Fascism does not devalue art. In fact, it is even possible to argue that far from being the instigator of tribal hysteria, television drama routinely facilitates its catharsis precisely because it has the power to address the need at the same time as narrativising the possible consequences. Myths *can* intervene: this is not the exclusive territory of the polemic realist piece. I would not want to suggest that they obviate other discourses - that they are therefore *enough* - but they do have an important role to play in reminding ourselves of our capacity for sharing and acting together and rehearsing outcomes. Myth should serve social life, not replace or disguise it, and providing a mechanism for coping certainly does not *cause* social malaise such as atomisation or lost faith in the public sphere.

Clearly however, terrestrial television does endeavour to structure and prioritise rituals for us, marking out high points in its daily and weekly schedules of habitual myth-weaving. Perhaps, as Caughie argues, "television and television drama belong to the

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[10] Will Hutton "There's nothing like a good disaster", *The Observer*, 30 July 2000, 30.
[11] In August 2000.

tradition of the detail rather than the tradition of the sublime, and it is worth saying that Naomi Schor associates this tradition with the domestic, the everyday and the ornamental...." (2000: 167) Yet by sustaining an 'aesthetic of detail', acting, he argues, can present a small rebellion within an increasingly commodified culture. In fact "quality drama" more broadly has a particular place in this dialectic of everyday-ness and special-ness, and Paul Kerr for one has noted the awe-inspiring significance of the "accustomed Sunday slot" (1982: 8) that is still the undisputed home of costume drama. The emotional seriousness of plot and characterisation, and at a more material level 'high production values', also work to mark these serials out as special in spite of their familiar codes. Yet at best they might also live up to their gravity, budgets and scheduling: firstly because the aesthetic experience they can provide is an extra-mundane one, the success of which does not depend upon (even if it sometimes accompanies) gloss and spectacle; and secondly because they can express need without legitimising or excusing its causes.

MYTH AND BEYOND

The primary motive behind this chapter was to draw attention to use-values not really acknowledged by established critical dichotomies such as realism/anti-realism, passivity/activity, critique/solace, and so on. The attributes of myth are often so routine they are taken for granted or rejected altogether. But if there are values outside of those presently registered by critics and theorists, a more diverse aesthetics has also to acknowledge that there will clearly be values outside of those required by the paradigm of myth, not least because we all bring other critical faculties to bear when we enjoy them. Morally troubling, ambiguous *exposés* like *The Cops*

(BBC/World 1999-) actively contest certain mythic imperatives: they can not qualify as myth, nor is one likely to want them to. Moreover, we know from Raymond Williams that drama actually transcended myth some time ago:

> It is neither ritual which discloses the God, nor myth which requires and sustains repetition. It is specific, active, interactive composition: an action not an act; an open practice that has been deliberately abstracted from temporary practical or magical ends: a complex opening of ritual to public and variable action; a moving beyond myth to dramatic versions of myth and of history. .... Drama broke from fixed signs, established its permanent distance from myth and ritual and from the hierarchical figures and processions of state; broke for precise historical and cultural reasons into a more complex, more active and more questioning world. (Williams 1974: 7/8)

But as Williams goes on to note, "drama, which separated out, did not separate out altogether" for there continues to be an interactive relationship between residual "rhythms and movements" and "an emergent representation" (ibid). The television serial, more than any other contemporary dramatic form, frequently reaches back to its mythological roots, albeit with varying degrees of success. Arguably, it has resurrected these functions in response to the process of separation that reached its apotheosis in the twentieth century, once stage and film art increasingly abandoned social relationships in favour of private psychological expression. The paradigm of 'dramatic myth' acknowledges both traditions, because both are as evident in the contemporary television drama serial as the mixed conventions of naturalism and

symbolism, realism and anti-realism. Certainly, the dynamism and stylistic diversity of many texts also needs to be acknowledged, but this requires a prior commitment to the functions being served. Recognising the dual traditions embraced by television drama – its fusion of archaic antecedents with the more active, questioning types of dramatic narrative that came to later prominence - is fundamental to understanding the unique aesthetic value that so many contemporary serials, to a greater or lesser extent, actively propose.

CHAPTER FIVE

"There and Then":

Costumes, Metaphors and Myth

5.1 The 1990s Costume Cycle

'Costume dramas' - the period prototype of what was once widely known as the 'classic serial' - consistently rank high amongst popular successes from the mid-1990s onwards. These were insistently mainstream and invariably expensive. All were scheduled in peak-time, often in highly competitive slots, and were able to garner broad heterogeneous audiences as well as industry accolades (notably in craft, design and performance categories). Heavy investment demanded heavy promotion, and such serials tended to be widely reviewed and documented by the press, all of which stoked a discursive phenomenon that reached its peak with *Pride and Prejudice* (BBC, 1995). This new version of an old favourite so infiltrated everyday gossip that the nation's 'addiction' inspired permanent record in Bridget Jones' equally talked-about and best-selling diary.[1] It was all a marked contrast to the late 1980s and early 1990s, a period that - notwithstanding a spate of so-called 'heritage' feature films, mainly associated with FilmFour - had seen actual television serialisations fall out of favour with broadcasters, and presumably with audiences.[2] The later resurgence of the literary adaptation was by no means accidental, and was driven in scope and nature by both

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[1] Helen Fielding, *Bridget Jones Diary*, (Picador 1996), 246.
[2] During the five years from 1989 to 1993 there were 13 peak-time historical serials, of which only 4 were adaptations of 'classics' (2 Dickens, Lawrence, Stendhal) all with considerably lower budgets than those in the latter part of the decade.

commercial *and* artistic factors, that both shaped and responded to an upturn in generic popularity.

In the immediate aftermath of Thatcherism and the recessionary anxieties that characterised the years from 1989 to 1993, it had seemed to be tense, edgy, and sharply constructed crime fiction such as *Cracker* (Granada 1993-) and *Prime Suspect* (Granada 1991-) that best resonated with the prevailing social unease. Marrying these prestige mini-serials with the longstanding successes of episodic formats such as *Heartbeat* (Yorkshire 1992) had propelled mainstream ITV drama into a position of clear ratings supremacy over its main rival. By 1993, BBC1 seemed to have to lost both high ground and mass appeal, and stood accused of languishing "in the trough of creative fatigue caused by penury and bosses with rarefied tastes."[3] Such was the context for *Middlemarch* (BBC, Jan 1994), which came to be seen as something of a watershed in the fortunes of BBC drama, and the catalyst for the renaissance of the literary adaptation. It had been an epic, and (at a cost of some £6m) a somewhat risky financial undertaking, so the positive public response blew oxygen into the Corporation's struggle for identity. Here was a territory in which it could once more excel, for it alone possessed the cultural competence to dramatise 'the classics' legitimately. However, the assured demise of the cosy public service/commercial duopoly meant that this time around neither ITV nor Channel 4 were content to leave BBC dominion intact, and rival adaptations swiftly followed, culminating in November 1999 in a symbolic and much hyped head-to-head between *Wives and Daughters* (BBC1) and *Oliver Twist* (Granada). The previous year, Carlton TV executive Jonathan Powell had already been obliged to defend output levels on the grounds that

classic serials had only just regained the same share of the overall programme mix as they had fifteen years before.[4] It is not an altogether helpful comparison, as it implies that 'classics' are a fixture to be rediscovered, rather than continually reinvented in contemporary ways. Moreover, the late 1990s cycle of costume dramas were a decidedly heterogeneous mix that achieved popular status in a very particular set of circumstances. Not only were there clear attempts at channel/product differentiation, but also there were other more profound qualitative differences between texts, as well as a number of shared characteristics that clearly demarcate the cycle from previous incarnations of the form. Rather than adumbrate these now, I will return to them later, in the context of particular case studies from the period.

I would now like to outline the way in which these texts are often *perceived* as an homogenous mass, and to draw attention to the quite startling discrepancy between their evident attractions and their critical standing. To date it has been the case that despite - indeed possibly *because* of - mainstream success, critical coverage of costume drama is almost universally negative or at best, apologetic: certainly no other dramatic genre seems to arouse the same level of dismissive, defensive cynicism. There is nothing new or distinctive about this: in 1982 for example, Paul Kerr had noted how "Both journalistically and educationally, classic serials seem to be either beyond criticism or beneath contempt" (Kerr 1982: 7). Although rarely acknowledged as a critical motive, the pleasures of the period piece are commonly associated with

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[3] William Phillips, "Who makes the crowd-pullers?", *Television* (The Journal of the Royal Television Society), November 1998, 24.

[4] A veteran producer of classics in his BBC days, Powell was reported in *The Guardian* (Media), 26 Oct 1998, 2. Actually, because of the huge increase in broadcast hours, period drama production was still proportionately much lower than in the 1970s, and in 1983 alone there had been 10 historical serials.

women, and presumed to be those of comfort and spectacle, romance and nostalgia - typically characterised as "feet-up Sunday night with a box of chocs"[5]. More sophisticated arguments included the charge of inherent conservatism, and a "toffs in frocks" appeal to the export market, hence the complaint that these shore up an idealised construct of English heritage. In Britain in the early 1970s Raymond Williams had also criticised the transfer of literary cultural prestige as being inimical to the development of television's own potential (see O'Connor 1989: 133-6), although from an American perspective, Newcomb (1987: 621) lauded BBC cultural imports as transcending the dramatic limitations imposed by the *industrial* norms of the episodic series. In a slightly different register, adaptations have stood condemned for perpetuating a Leavisite canon, and/or for reductively providing mere "aerosol versions of great works".[6]

These ideas, all readily accessible today in newspaper reviews and entertainment guides, evidently derive inspiration and continued legitimacy from the complex but no less hostile tradition in academic critique of earlier serials and/or cinema films. It is difficult to propose a typology of more up-to-date and specific academic objections to the television costume drama because although decisively pejorative, it is a critical 'debate' that has been but sporadically nurtured. Typically, Kerr's rashly entitled article "Classic Serials - to be continued" (1982) never actually was: indeed, it was the last word on the matter in *Screen* for quite some time. One consequence of this is a tendency simply to import arguments formulated in response to other, quite different texts and contexts: notably the 'heritage film' debate running in film theory since the

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[5] Jacques Peretti, "Dressed for success", *The Guardian* G2, 7 Jun 1999, 17.
[6] Jonathan Miller, James MacTaggart Lecture, EITF 1983.

early 1980s. I will not rehearse the various positions of the latter at length, although I will draw upon some of this material where it seems to yield relevant insights.

For example, Andrew Higson has addressed the problem of regarding the heritage film as a discrete genre, concluding that is useful to analyse common 'operational' tendencies so long as we "do not try to regulate the genre or cycle too closely or too loosely." (Higson 1996: 235). Clearly, a similar approach can be taken with television although here we should be doubly cautious because whereas the cinematic cycle has been contested by reference to the textual strategies of specific works, television reviewers have insistently generalised, shoring up the idea of a fallacious prototype from which all actual costume serials are mere variations. For example, Kathryn Flett greeted *Longitude* (BBC 2000) as "that rare thing – a costume drama which was not about cute orphans making their way in the world or nice gels struggling to win the favours of an eligible lord, but about something important and, in its own way, the equal of its source material."[7] This particularl serial was certainly remarkable, not least because it did take a subject unusual to television and developed it with measured pace, sensitivity and complexity.[8] Similarly laudatory previews of *A Respectable Trade* (BBC 1998) suggest that there was a certain kudos to be had from purveying the past with the edge of contemporary hindsight.[9] But by more comprehensive criteria, these were not the only texts of merit. Stereotyping is a clear strategy for belittling any genre or form, but as I shall also suggest later, even the prevailing

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[7] Kathryn Flett, "Putting Greenwich on the map", *The Observer* (Review), 9 Jan 2000.

[8] Adapted from Dava Sobel's novel, this told of John Harrison's quest to develop a seaworthy time piece, and his lifelong struggle against the received wisdom and injustice of the professional establishment.

[9] In other words, the 'harsh reality' principle. In effect, *A Respectable Trade* was to prove something of a disappointment despite bravely confronting Bristol's slave-trading past. Having set up a very complex and identifiable assemblage in order to demonstrate the social ordinariness of evil, it then defaulted almost entirely to soft-focussing a fanciful inter-racial love story.

generalisations about costume drama can invite a more positive critical evaluation if recast in the terms and criteria of dramatic myth. Furthermore, re-mythologising and counter-mythologising can be attempted with the most apparently anachronistic of novels, but in any event, even a cursory glance at the list of serials transmitted during the research period reveals that there were none that fit the stereotype presumed by Flett.[10] In fact, the only plot that approximates her description is that of Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, the whole point of which is satirically to subvert (an admittedly now lost) eighteenth century romantic predilection for cute orphans and 'nice gels'. The artificial construction of a negative prototype has clear parallels with what Corner (1992) describes as the "presumption as theory" tendencies of the realist debate, and both discourses depend upon a set of dogmatic precepts that bear little relation to actual contemporary serials or more pertinently, to the functions they serve within a broader cultural context.

Another characteristic common to such secondary discourse is a tendency to justify prejudices with tangential assumptions about target audiences, and so to see the classic adaptation as fodder for the cultural prejudices and aspirational tastes of *Daily Mail* reading 'middle England'. As Joan Rubin (1992) has noted in a different context, although the authoritative disdain of high culture towards the masses has now been systematically shaken, few have seen sufficient political capital to be gained by defending the supposed tastes of the supposed bourgeoisie. Because the middle

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[10] Between Autumn 1997 and Summer 2000 there was a total of 22 serialised adaptations, four of which were 20th century 'classics' (*Gormenghast, Dance to the Music of Time, The Scarlet Pimpernel* and a Sherlock Holmes), and seven were adaptations of novels that like *Longitude*, were written recently but set historically. Of those that remained, there were four (decidedly unsentimental) versions of Dickens novels, one Hardy, one Gaskell, no Jane Austen whatsoever, and a production each of *Madame Bovary* and *Anna Karenina*: both of which were remarkable for their darkness and eroticism. The others were *Vanity Fair, Tom Jones*, and *Hornblower*. See Appendix A for further details.

ground is neither 'high' nor 'low' it is frequently dismissed by both ends of the spectrum for debasing and vulgarising the tastes of the elite while lacking the mandate or political justification of mass naivety. Middlebrow is thus often mapped straight on to a preposterously broad notion of a 'middle-class' and, often, to wholly unrelated experiential judgements of that which is also 'middling' in quality. Rubin's own study of American book clubs during the inter-war period actually charts the emergence of these ideas of banality and mediocrity, and attempts to redress the way anti-middlebrow diatribes "slighted the legitimate needs and aspirations of millions of 'average intelligent readers'" during this period (Rubin 1992: xix). Similarly, there is good reason to suppose that period adaptations are as in line with supposedly 'popular' tastes and sensibilities as any other genre. As an example of sheer numbers, it is worth noting that the simultaneously broadcast, first episodes of *Wives and Daughters* and *Oliver Twist* together managed to attract over 17 million viewers. There are no published analyses that systematically compare demographic audience composition for individual television genres, but it is clear that figures would vary widely according to the particular text, channel and slot. In her statistical analysis of cinema audiences, Claire Monk observes that it should not be surprising that audience profiles for heritage films should be "middle class", given that British cinema audiences are more ABC1 for all drama than the overall cinematic average. She also makes the salutary point that the audience for say, *Howards End* was significantly less ABC1 than that for *The Piano* (a text heavily debated in successive issues of *Screen*), and notes that the apparently populist *Four Weddings And A Funeral* actually attracted an audience that was strikingly middle class. The cinematic mainstream is heavily skewed towards young men, leading her to speculate that "critical, media and cultural animosity or indifference towards heritage films – and, more broadly, costume films –

is at least partly rooted in the association of these films with audiences whose film-going habits and tastes deviate from the patterns of this privileged young male 'mainstream'." (Monk 1999: 31) Whereas the television mainstream is proportionately older, poorer, and more likely to be female, magazine previewers often tend to mirror both the assumptions and the demographic profile of this cinematic 'elite'.

Commissioning criteria, viewing context, and audience address are just three of the fundamental differences between heritage (and likewise 'post-heritage') cinema and peak time television. During the later 1990s, concerted attempts by the establishment to rekindle the British film industry (with tax breaks and Lottery grants) were clearly international in motivation: the idea being to penetrate global (or at least American) markets.[11] By contrast, television serial production, although increasingly under pressure to improve its overseas sales performance, was still driven by a predominantly domestic agenda. As far as commissioners were concerned, the home market was still paramount, however convenient it has been for some critics to dismiss the costume serial as a mere export commodity. Moreover, although the days of taking money from co-producers whilst resisting editorial intervention were undoubtedly numbered, and however necessary this sort of funding had become during the period, it remained marginal in relation to advertising and licence fee revenue. Commercial sponsors and co-producers had yet to exercise the degree of influence warned of during the 1970s (see Kerr 1982: 18). All of which throws into doubt easy presuppositions about

[11] Film Four also adjusted its funding policy in 1999/2000, after entering into a relationship with Warner Brothers to make at least two big-budget films a year.

narrative and visual strategies having been determined by the deliberate construction of a *marketable* national identity.

Indeed, there are also considerable aesthetic and formal differences between heritage cinema and television period drama. Eighteenth and nineteenth century novels, often having been serialised themselves, are self-evidently suited to multi-episode television, with its particular predilection for developing multiple storylines, and privileging both performance and a large character ensemble. As I shall now go on to argue, this can put a very different emphasis on the pleasures and meanings at stake. A frequent criticism of period drama is that it can propose a nostalgic vision of the past in contrast to the present, but still anneal class differences and brutal historical realities with lingering long shots of country estates and stately homes. The basic premise here is realist, the strategy to hold up the objective veracity of historical fact as a measure for the validity of historical fiction. But as an axis this has been severely shaken by the postmodernist recognition that history, like religion, is itself a collection of myths (see chapter three). Another essentially Barthesian argument often levelled at historical drama is that it 'naturalises' contemporary (bourgeois) societal order and mores with the implicit claim that things were not once better, but that they have been 'ever thus'. By attacking the privileging of a certain historical experience above the class, race or gender experiences of others, the heritage debate raises important issues that I shall return to shortly, but we do need also to re-assert that dramatic and mythological engagement can not be continually distilled down to the ultimate delivery of ideological meaning. *Any* explanatory historical discourse is ideological in so far as it implicitly invites contemporary experience to be measured favourably or unfavourably against the past.

Wollen articulates a paradigmatic position of critique when she suggests that debate should really concentrate on the aesthetic limitations that heritage fictions impose upon the scope of the very historical investigation they invite. She argues, for example, that admissions (of the 'shadier' downside of an imperial past) "can be fudged through the conventions of fiction. Narrative pull, the complexities of characterisation and a moving sound-track can alleviate the severity of dispassionate critiques." (Wollen 1991:182) This raises again the dead spectre of formalism, of subordinating content or seeing it as over-determined by the narrative framework. Even the 'classic' rubric itself has been blamed for acting as a veneer of respectability in spite of the radical substance to many of these original works. Eighteenth and nineteenth century novels, like retrospective and/or contemporary-set fictions, were obliged to work with what Jameson describes as "the political logic which is already inherent in the raw material" of daily life (1992: 38). That this political core has sometimes been evacuated by a serial's determined focus on, say, sexual relationships may, nevertheless, suggest bone fide grounds for critique. It is perhaps, to have your cake and eat it: the poetic and performative freedom of the past combined with instant titillation of the present.

Yet the project to decode 'fudged admissions' can lead critics to overlook the more substantive, and arguably legitimate, reasons for textual popularity. The truth/history axis of debate is often inappropriate, and ignores that serials can be challenging in other ways. The mythological imperative at work is not necessarily to make sense of the past, but to use the past to make sense of the present. As the example of *Vanity Fair* should illustrate, popular costume serials are free to *deploy* history as Shakespeare often did - as another world, a purely fictive domain for analogous,

symbolic signification. By analogy, the daily human experience of the present might once again become coherent. According to Ian Parker:

> To learn that a TV drama is adapted from a novel is, increasingly, to learn good news. There are a thousand exceptions to the rule, but the general, depressing truth is than an original TV drama will be frantic, silly and implausible - and quite often nude - and that adaptations will not. (If modern TV audiences have a taste for period dramas, this is nothing to do with soft-headed nostalgia or a fetish for bonnets, but because the people in them live lives that make fictional sense - and the people given us by Lynda La Plante do not.)[12]

This is a timely reminder of the storytelling and explanatory strengths of 'classic novels', of their commitment to the logical 'working through' of characterisation and plot. Parker's comments are actually comparable to those made by Wright regarding the Western, a major attraction of which being the sheer breadth of occupations and character types that its situational premise allows it to assemble. This makes "... details of motivation unnecessary and intensifies the force of their situational antagonisms. Set in a historical context where these differences are believable, stories that utilize this potential can readily portray fundamental conflicts by relying on the established meanings of the various types." (1975: 6). Like the Western, the historical setting of the period piece gives greater licence to a broader range of interactional conflicts. These conflicts are frequently analogous to the present, sometimes even

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[12] Ian Parker, "Cash for questions", *The Observer Review*, 13 Sep 1998, 10

implying a world (or promise) of greater tolerance, as even the restrained confines of Austen adaptations are sometimes able to generate a sense of social richness and diversity. This capacity for societal breadth is important, because one common criticism of costume dramas is that they dominate through selectivity: not just because they *represent* one set of class experiences to the exclusion of others, but because, as both Sartre and Jameson have claimed, any text might elect "their readership in advance by the omission of certain kinds of *explanations* (only needed by readers with different kinds of class experience)." (Jameson 1992: 170 – my italics). Jameson contrasts this with 'oppositional realisms' that "turn the tables on hegemonic explanation and omission and omit the *other* explanations...". Arguably however, such a counter-strategy might be problematic for both myth and mainstream television drama because of their common emphasis on making sense and diverse group dynamics. A truly ambitious dramatic myth might try to offer a more complex and diverse set of explanations to a wider viewing constituency than that of any simple hegemonic ideology. As I will suggest below, many texts do exploit their licence to provide a broad and idiosyncratic range of personalities and types: perhaps superficially, by parading grotesque follies (*Vanity Fair*) or more integrally, by building up a world of dark and eerie corners in which bitter avengers or eccentrics lurk (*Our Mutual Friend*).

Additionally, the opportunities for characterisation further enhances the pleasure to be had from performance, the flamboyance of which was one of the great selling points of the 1990s costume cycle. As Caughie notes (2000: 168) it is important not to understate the reflective and experiential value invited by this contemplation of character. Often it can touch to an almost visceral degree that again recalls the

sensory pull of music and primitive myth, without necessarily meaning that the viewer is lost to the fantastic illusion of it all. Crucially, both the greater licence of characterisation/performance, and the use of a near mythological past, also yield opportunities for conflicts to be made symbolic and external. This is well illustrated by *Anna Karenina* (Channel 4, 2000) when Anna realises that if she were to leave her husband not only would she forfeit her right to see her son, but would also perpetually have to sustain the interest of her lover in order to survive society without the protected status of marriage. The transposition of time and place makes it possible to portray the contradictions here through plausible action (duels, the snubs of other ladies, the physical barring of Anna's entry to her old home) and so makes them both more visible and more dramatic than their contemporary equivalents. Yet although such *activities* are less likely today, this is still far from being an anachronistic scenario: women bound through their love for their children have fewer choices, the decline of marriage (and its social status) has left many women socially vulnerable, emotionally fearful and economically insecure. Today these are often affective, psychological and socially invisible issues, but the period setting makes it possible for them to be *played out* dramatically. As we shall see, this was an opportunity missed (or misunderstood) in *Vanity Fair*, which took the need to be relevant far too superficially and subordinated all conflicts to a central opposition between public charade and solipsistic private pain. The public v inter-personal conflict is actually dealt with far more effectively within the expressionistic and symbolic subtext of *Our Mutual Friend*, an equally difficult work to adapt.

Just as the use of the photographic image does not automatically denote realism (see chapter three), it is no longer feasible to presume that a period setting is in itself a

claim to historical truth, when the real interest is actually elsewhere. Where a text makes explicit claims to represent actual historical events or to account for a collective experience (as was one objective of *Warriors*) then of course the validity of these particular claims should be assessed against alternative sources. More often than not however, these claims are not even proposed by the text but assumed by the same critics who, it has to be said, also tend to presume a craven ignorance of both history and fictive conventions on the part of the mass audience. Sue Harper's study of the heyday of British costume film makes a similar point about the way - during the inter-war and war years - official censors consistently "failed to recognise that popular film was such precisely because it was a tactful negotiation between the audience's desires and its sense of actuality." (1994:182). For all the famous accuracy of the BBC's Design and Costume department, increased familiarity with the various period mise-en-scènes, has allowed them to become almost wholly self-referential: they are a mutually understood convention, a part of the 'deal'. This loss of reference could well be interpreted as the fetishisation and commodification of the historical image as "the surface sheen of a period fashion reality" (Jameson 1992: 130) but I would suggest that even Jameson's characterisation (of the "nostalgia-deco" film) does not really extend to recent historical dramas on television. These often deploy gloss and spectacle but subordinate it to human interest storylines – first and foremost it must be a world in which the action *makes sense*. If anything, most of the 1990s cycle of period television dramas tend to hark back to what he elsewhere dubs "older historical representations" once characterised by Lukàcs as a chance to *experience* 'history' by association with an "average hero" (Jameson 1992: 221). The only difference being that whereas the former still invite vicarious experience of a world different to our own, it need not be historically specific - just loosely 'historic', or outside time.

Rather than attempt to replace one set of essentialist stereotypes with another, I shall now concentrate analysis on two specific, and typically a-typical texts: *Vanity Fair* (BBC, November 1998) and *Our Mutual Friend* (BBC, March 1998), with a view to uncovering the sort of strengths and weaknesses that might well go ignored by the dogmatic critical positions discussed above. Recognising where these serials meet or fail mythic expectations, as well as realist ones (for these too remain legitimate in many cases) can bring about a shift in their critical standing.

5.2 Vanity Fair

This most recent version of *Vanity Fair* had few screen predecessors, although the original satirical novel draws upon 'archetypal' tales of 'rags to riches and just comeuppance' that also resurface, with or without Thackeray's characters, in earlier costume cycles and texts such as *The Wicked Lady* (Gainsborough, 1945). There had been three previous British televisations of *Vanity Fair* (in 1956 on BBC1, 1967 on BBC2, and 1987 on BBC1) but none ever really achieved status as a memorable or 'definitive' version, even though the 1967 production was actually the Corporation's first ever colour serial.[13] Thus it was a vaguely familiar story, within the collective cultural memory, and scheduled in the Sunday slot normally reserved to costume epics. The BBC evidently had high hopes for the serial, declaring it the centrepiece of its Autumn season, and on-air trails began a clear month before the first episode. These were snappy montages of choice excerpts: a be-wigged and powdered harlequin

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[13] As a benchmark, the most frequently serialised classics on British television 1950 – 2000 were *Pride and Prejudice, Great Expectations*, and *David Copperfield* (all 5 versions each).

leering into an extreme wide-angle close-up, an obese grand dame (Miriam Margolyes) being carried to a carriage with comic gravitas, and so on. There was a clear promise of visual spectacle and theatrical performance, a surreal carnival you simply had to attend, and if all else failed then there was Natasha Little as Becky Sharp – a "wicked seductress" and modern femme fatale.[14]

The marketing strategy actually offers a valuable insight into some of the family resemblances common to the most successful adaptations of the 1990s. Characterisation was a key term in many previews, and described variously as "vividly grotesque all round" (*The Independent*), and "excessive but true to literary source" (*The Daily Telegraph*). Becky was central to all of this, and the main problem for listings guides seemed to be how to paraphrase the BBC press release by describing her in ever catchier phrases such as "wickedly pretty and prettily wicked" (*The Daily Express*) or "high spirited" and "properly sexy" (*The Independent*), although *The Sun* was content simply to predict that Little would "attract men in droves as the stunning schemer". Becky's relevance to contemporary audiences was emphatically underlined by *The Daily Mail*, which ran two lengthy features on consecutive days: in the first the serial was declared "a TV drama for our own time", whilst the second advised young women of today to forget about Bridget Jones and emulate Becky instead.[15] Expectations were also stoked by constant reference to Andrew Davies' association with many earlier costume successes: *The Guardian* described him as "the man who wrote television out of a crisis", and the *Daily Express* dubbed him "king of the period adaptation". This approval of the way he re-energised the form says much for public

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[14] Little was best known for a previous role as Rachel, an infamously wide-eyed manipulative lawyer in *This Life* (World/BBC 1996/7).

perceptions of its newly associated pleasures and values, and many critics referred to the pleasures of participation (often raucous) and pace. Indeed, one previewer declared there are currently only two types of costume drama - "... ribald or real? Noisy or natural? Bosomy or bleak?" - and concluded of *Vanity Fair*: " 'Tis a romp".[16]

But *Vanity Fair* was always designed to be more than this. The decision to engage Marc Munden, a director best known for his documentary work, is evidence of a parallel gambit to intervene in the very tradition of success with which Andrew Davies was associated. At first it seemed that Munden had discovered audio-visual equivalents for Davies' verbal ingenuity, as everything about the first episode is contrived to sparkle and startle. Murray Gold's quirky loud carnival music combines frivolity with discordance, and sets the mood for a roller-coaster of spectacle and surprise. The opening shot is of a naked, obese woman posing on a couch and picking her nose in a bored and disinterested sort of a way before the camera pulls back to reveal a set of bohemian artists drinking around her. This is interceded by contrasting shots of the ankles, then the face of a pretty girl as she climbs an outside staircase and into the studio with more wine for her drunken father and friends. It is the young Becky, making an allegorical entry into a grotesque world of decadence and lust. The closing image of the same episode also lingers on greed by incongruously framing together a large, noisily chomping black sow in the foreground whilst relegating the

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[15] Melanie McDonagh, "Is Becky Sharp a role model for modern women?", *The Daily Mail*, 2 Nov 1998, 18/19.
[16] Matthew bond, "'Tis a romp, and an enjoyable one at that", *Daily Telegraph* (Television and Radio), 31 Oct 1998, 3.

commanding façade of Queens Crawley to the background. Both these scenes imply a clearly irreverent jab at the sort of lingering loving gaze of the heritage film by juxtaposition with a rather cruder image.

These top and tail frames also perform a number of expressly symbolic functions, conveying an overall sense of aesthetically slick and competent play, whilst positing the sort of quirky, incongruent metaphor that is probably more recognisable from advertising than drama. They also signal deliberate deviation from the conventions of action and sub-text as neither the sow nor the naked woman serve any direct story-telling function. Instead they act as one-minute signifiers, self-conscious shorthand instructions to media and image-literate viewers regarding the world of the story, and the spirit in which it should be interpreted. It is a far cry from the leisurely character development and exposition of previous cycles of the literary adaptation. It also becomes apparent from the use of both interior and exterior space that we are not in the elegant confinement of Jane Austen dramatisations,[17] nor a Dickensian melodramatic world in which morality will eventually triumph. This is a space made perilous and claustrophobic by competing desires and lascivious demands. But aside from novelty, the purpose of many of the spatial techniques is also rather elusive, particular in the case of interior sequences. There is, for example, an exaggerated tendency to emphasise facial close-ups, often to grotesque effect and as if to deny the role of milieu in these characters' lives. The repetitious detachment of faces from bodies, and bodies from their environment becomes curiously unsettling despite the clear inference that they are all part of the same grotesque parade. Similar effects are achieved by excessively formal composition and arrangement of the actors within the

frame. The best example of this is early in episode five, when Becky, Rawdon and young 'Rawdy' collaboratively persuade Miss Briggs to join their happy family and entrust her legacy to their care. The Crawley family link arms and freeze in a parodic tableau of a family portrait. It is a modern, cheesy, 'heads together' family photograph, not a Victorian image at all, and whilst it does serve to highlight the nature of the game they are playing, it also totally disrupts the narrative continuity. Actually, it is reminiscent of a television documentary technique (fashionable in the early 1990s) which effectively objectifies 'real people', by freeze-framing them posing formally in their home environment.

The exterior techniques appear more typical in themselves, yet their place in the montage can become equally incongruous. Wide panoramas of empty, Hardy-esque landscapes, give way to close-ups of sheep in a field, or to the gnarled and comically distorted faces of the tenants on the Crawley estate. These are jolting and sometimes humorous images, but unlike *Our Mutual Friend* (see below) they do not add up to a metaphoric topography. When the young people take a walk along the (implausibly sandy) beach at 'Brighton', or the regiment arrives in Brussels, geographical space is a mere moving backdrop to a frivolous social cavalcade, that remains oblivious to anything other than its own concerns. This framing and objectifying does not simply foreground the actors as excessive caricatures, it *detaches* them from anything that might make them either credible, or analogous to contemporary society.

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[17] For an analysis of the dialectic encoded in the topography of these texts see Julianne Pidduck, "Of windows and country walks", *Screen* 39:4, Winter 1998, pp381 - 400.

History

The deployment of history for thematic rather than historical purposes is more consistent with other examples of the costume serial. The character contrasts between Becky and her old friend Amelia are used increasingly to emphasise the darker underbelly of the social masquerade. Throughout episode five, the parallels between the two women's divergent strategies for financial survival become more and more explicit: whilst Amelia resigns herself to miserable, lonely penury, Becky lives high on "nothing a year", and – with the tacit assistance of her husband – spends her time flattering her brother in-law (the new Sir Pitt) and flirting with the physically repugnant but hugely wealthy and influential Lord Steyne. In one elaborate comic display of foreplay, Becky is sat to the right of the frame, playing the piano and singing to him ("what's life without passion?") whilst looking for all the world as if she is brushing the fingers of her right hand against his groin. Steyne is grinning and standing to the left but his lascivious gaze turns to exaggerated frustration by the *interruptus* of Miss Briggs' innocent applause. At this point we cut to a shot of Amelia, dressed in mourning and playing a heavy-hearted dirge to herself as she chokes back the tears. She rises, takes paper and quill and begins to write a letter to Mr Osborne, accepting his offer of guardianship for her young son.

Needless to say, Becky's scene is infused with humour and energy, and her wit and resourcefulness comes into sharp contrast with Amelia's apparently unimaginative resignation to her fate. Much of this is conveyed in visual shorthand by the second-order mobilisation of what Barthes would have described as pre-existing "mythic" signifiers: Rebecca is all tumbling Regency curls and heaving bosom in an empire-line

black velvet frock, and she sits surrounded by space and opulence amid an elegant Georgian suite. Amelia, by marked contrast, is a model of Victoriana: her dress is also black but restrained, buttoned to the throat and topped by a dowdy white mop cap, as she sits amid the dark wooden panelling, oppressive detritus and ornamental trappings common to later nineteenth century bourgeois interiors. It is not so much her distress as her appearance that makes Amelia seem like a wet rag after the flirtatious pleasures of the previous scene.

It is interesting that Thackeray himself chose to set his epic social critique in an earlier epoch than his own (the Napoleonic wars), partly so that his contemporary Victorians might be spared the brutal clarity of a mirror to themselves, and partly to pre-empt the scandal of his more licentious characters. Victorians readers were presumably to be allowed the solace of their own sense of moral superiority to this earlier, permissive age. Harper (1994) offers a fascinating insight into the way these two historical periods have since come to signify so much in the popular imagination. Whereas the Regency epoch has traditionally been used to constitute the past as a site of unconstrained *pleasure* (as has the aristocracy), the iconography of Victorian England has become synonymous with bourgeois values, controlled sexuality and neo-puritanism. Neither order of signification has anything to do with 'historical authenticity' of course, but it is still unusually audacious for Munden to bring *both* into parallel play in a contemporaneous sequence. Moreover, by doing so he clearly assumes a level of sophistication amongst viewers who would be able to 'read' the connotations of these references.

Critique

Becky's indiscriminate opportunism is typical of the satirical inversion of traditionally Romantic themes, such as marrying for love rather than money, and at this stage Amelia presents a most unattractive alternative to her friend's self-preservation and high life. However, the formal framing and visual objectification of Becky makes it difficult to identify with her pleasure in manipulating all the other larger-than-life gargoyles around her. Unlike the reflexive mode of direct camera address used in say, *Moll Flanders* (Granada 1996/7) or *Tom Jones* (BBC 1997), the discontinuity and stylised aestheticism of *Vanity Fair* is a continual invitation for the audience to stand back and observe, often with contempt. Whereas Moll and 'Fielding'[18] invite us to join in the boisterous adventure, and to share their amusement at variously idiosyncratic characters (including themselves), the self-conscious reiteration of meaningful images in *Vanity Fair* deliberately interrupts the flow of the romp. This denial of participatory pleasure actually rebounds on the strategy of critique, principally because it later undermines the emotional impact when matters take a more serious turn.

At the close of episode three, the tension between potential gravity of war and the social decadence of the endless balls and dinner parties, is brought to the verge of crisis when the regiment is marched to Waterloo to meet Napoleon. Episode four opens with a lingering image of a soldier's footprint, and a shot of Amelia weeping at her husband's departure. Becky, of course, is more resilient. A while later there is a

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[18] The 1997 BBC version of *Tom Jones* cast Henry Fielding as an extra-diegetic on-screen character (played by John Sessions) who was quite unable to keep up with, let alone control, events.

protracted episode in which news of imminent danger prompts Jos (the only remaining British man) to tear about Brussels in a frenzy as he looks for a means of escape. There is no coverage of the battle until much later, leaving the narrative to concentrate on his efforts to persuade Amelia to accompany him, and to make much comic capital from his humiliation at the hands of Mrs O'Dowd (wife of the regimental Major). Eventually, Becky persuades him to pay an extortionate price for her horses and he departs. Thackeray's Amelia is a notoriously "fade and insipid" counter-heroine, and the serial reiterates this constantly, but in this sequence, the cumulative presence of her devoted loyalty, Mrs O'Dowd's forthright courage, and even Becky's cool resourcefulness, all add up to a viable alternative to Jos Sedley's preposterous vanity and weakness. It is one of the rare instances when vanity is countered by moral alternatives. At no point is the behaviour of Jos juxtaposed with that of George or Dobbin, which confirms that the opposition proposed is not between cowardice and heroism, but between the follies of men and the steadfast common sense of women. This is rather interesting because although it is difficult to identify with the values of any one individual, the text does periodically struggle towards the general possibility of humanist, and (in this instance, 'feminine') values. In spite of all the slick and tricksy subversion of costume conventions, this struggle could be interpreted as a drive to occasionally ground the text by restoring an ethical 'mythic' function. As I shall illustrate, this drive is also evident elsewhere, notably in the narrative representation of the two children (young Rawdy and young George).

Truth and Relevance

As the serial progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that Munden's directorial strategy is to encode explicit critique within a loosely generic form, and to twist conventions to new thematic purpose. The use of quick visual signifiers, and the objectifying and detached framing of many sequences may, like a number of recent documentaries, be the logical outcome of Bazin's anti-fictive realist ideals (see chapter 3, 45-47). Jameson has described this inheritance as a "historical curiosity" resulting in texts that participate

> "... in that general repudiation of, and even loathing and revulsion for, the fictive as such which seems to characterize our own time: some new and intensified form of cultural guilt, perhaps, but even more surely the new logic of material signifiers which comes to characterize the moment called postmodernism". (Jameson 1992: 187)

In *Vanity Fair* the result is less a fictive recreation or representation than a quasi-documentary *exposé* of Becky's world. But in many respects, it was satire without a target: after all, where and when was this world, and at/to whom is the critique addressed? Give or take the actual Battle of Waterloo, there was a clear attempt to blur the specificity of the historical moment, to suggest a travelling elite cavalcade of sometime past. Presumably then, the objective was either to expose 'universal' human flaws (greed, infidelity) or to critique a world that is analogous to our own. All of which begs issues of relevance that clearly go beyond Becky's potential as a modern role model, because her mythic value depends ultimately on the trans-historical credibility of the world in which she finds herself. If similar societies give rise to

similar codes of behaviour, then we must recognise the pressures of our own vain society in hers.

In this sense, the most important character for contemporary purposes is not Becky at all, but Mr Osborne. Shortly after Osborne takes over the care of his paternal grandson, there is a scene in which he dines with his sister Jane whilst young Georgy precociously recites Latin at the table. The old man is drunk, which exacerbates the madness and unspent grief he has been nursing since his son's death, and when Jane tentatively suggest that the child should take water with his next glass of claret, he violently orders her to pour the wine and leave. Osborne is left then amid the ominous shadows of a dimly lit, spartan and almost monochrome dining room: only the chandelier, crockery and the actor's skin tones relieve the black gloom. Alone with young Georgy, he tells the boy of the likeness he bears to his dead father, and twice repeats his regret that they "fell out" whilst the camera lingers on an extreme close-up of his eyes and nose. He proposes a further toast, which proves too much for the child who vomits on his plate before passing out on the table, and again we have a penetrating close-up of Osborne's eyes. This is intercut with a shot of his hand as he slowly strokes young George's ear. He weeps silently.

The reason why this scene is so effective, in its broody, moody, sinister way, has a great deal to do with the construction of Osborne's character to date, as he is so far the darkest figure in the assemblage, and the only one who is consistently depicted entirely without humour or irony. A self-made man without title or lineage, his power is his wealth and he does not hesitate to exercise it, whether by disinheriting George, withholding assistance from Sedley, or as now, in buying back his grandson and heir.

His binary is old Sedley, Amelia's kindly father who once helped him get started but from whom Osborne rapidly distanced himself at the first symptoms of Sedley's commercial failure. The complicated circumstances of Sedley's financial ruin are explained with impressive economy by the invention of the fact that he was a 'Lloyd's name'. Although not strictly anachronistic, this dramatic licence posits a very contemporary slant on the two men: Sedley, an old-fashioned gentleman of commerce who dabbles in wine and coal, can be no match for the emergent breed of capitalist of whom Osborne is the ruthless embodiment. His economic muscle and emotional poverty become emblematic of the true black side to the Fair, for his vulgar, bourgeois insistence on discussing money acts as a constant reminder that everything has its price. Osborne's intervention in Amelia's life also marks something of a narrative watershed, heralding a shift away from performative irony and revealing an increasingly grave and serious intent. After this incident, episode five moves progressively towards its intense conclusion.

It soon becomes apparent that Becky has actually strayed into rather dangerous territory with Lord Steyne who arranges for Rawdon to be kept safely overnight in an upmarket debtor's prison so that he can seduce her. However, thanks to Lady Jane, Rawdon is released, and arrives home to discover Steyne nuzzling his wife's breasts. All of this time the stylistic tone and tempo of the narrative has been growing steadily more grave and serious: the mise-en-scène darker, the costumes less colourful, the music more intense. Now, at the close of the episode, the ultimate crisis unfolds: Steyne scoffs in the face of Rawdon's jealous fury and at the very suggestion of Becky's innocence, telling the Captain "You sold your wife long ago, Sir". In a rapid sequence of fragmented shots, and entirely without music, Rawdon explodes and

forces his wife to reveal her hidden stash of appropriated money and gifts. His wife is already in tears by the time he leaves her, but once finally alone, Becky breaks into hollow, wracking sobs, dominating the frame for some ninety seconds or so, and for the entire duration of the production credits.

Like a true Machiavellian, Rebecca has finally over-reached herself, but the repercussions so far have been notably domestic. Many of Thackeray's contemporaries found his moral ambivalence troubling, but whereas Thackeray's protagonist took her heaviest punishment from social ostracism and then exile abroad, the Becky Sharp of the 1990s cannot feasibly get her comeuppance this way. Instead, she must be seen to pay a hefty personal and emotional price. Her games have been confounded, and she has indeed been snubbed by high society ladies, but most crucially, the inference is that she has lost a husband for whom she truly cared. Potent as this scene is, it is nevertheless puzzling that a serial which so obviously set out to paint grotesque portraits and thus to critique social behaviours, should have found it necessary to reach dramatic crisis on such a manifestly private note. Above and beyond the implication of Becky's 'proper' place in a pre-ordained hierarchy, there are social consequences to her behaviour, but the serial gives these scant attention. Similarly, having set up Osborne as such a malevolent mercantile, and thus recognisably contemporary figure, why then negate the impact of his actions on others by placing so much dramatic emphasis on his personal pain?

Part of the problem would seem to lie in the way the serial consistently undermines its own order of credible sincerity through its detachment and heavy use of irony. Having sacrificed narrative development and mythological explanation at the altar of *exposé*,

Vanity Fair seems increasingly unable to champion any moral perspective. This leaves it with nowhere to go other than exposing private pain in much the same way as it has exposed public vanity. Only in this solitary context does Munden seem able to risk 'sincerity', the paradox being that both scenes come almost as a relief and provide the two most credible, dramatic and *interesting* sequences of all six episodes. Like Becky's choking sobs, Osborne's drunken grief is a powerful argument against solipsism. However, the flipside of this is that the earlier social critique is left hanging without resolution or promise as the only consequences of social misdemeanour are experienced by the culprit his/her *self*. This is not a displacement from public to inter-subjective, but almost an evacuation of moral social order altogether. A rare exception to this is actually an invented scene in which Becky's son, young Rawdon complains to his father of Steyne's regular attendance and confides in him that he feels unloved by his own mother. This makes the child a uniquely innocent and sympathetic victim, and illustrates that whilst Becky's crime against Rawdon is mitigated by *his* compliance, her actions still have a serious impact on someone other than herself. That it should ultimately be the little children who suffer, is probably the last remaining *moral* argument against adult promiscuity. Other than this, the serial proved unable to update a critique of the social or behavioural consequences of greed, so leaving Becky only in breach of a private code of fidelity.

<u>Irony</u>

Ian Parker greeted the serial as: "British television's first ironic period adaptation", and added:

More than anything, this new *Vanity Fair* wants not to be mistaken for a standard, penny-farthing classic serial; it wants to break the mould, it wants to be the butt of no one's jokes. So, pre-emptively it has written its own French and Saunders script. It has applied its own veneer of self-mockery on to its splendid expensive, and, doubtless, Bafta-winning surface.[19]

Munden's *Vanity Fair* is uncomfortable not because it proposes an analogue to the greed and vanity of contemporary society, but because it reserved its main contempt for costume drama itself. It effectively ridiculed the generic 'investment of self' by suggesting itself so much cleverer than its viewers and failing to admit them into its own strategic game. If ideally, dramatic myth elaborates and complements its archaic origins rather than discarding them, and if the historical serial is indeed a last bastion for credible characters and relationships (in fictive *trans-historical* time and space), then at the best of times this is going to sit queasily with social satire, which has to be specific to make its incision. Making even the satire ironic was certainly a step too far, and Becky's eventual realisation that she cannot have it all seemed to mirror the serial's own concession to this. It is a welcome - if tardy - relief once the sparkling and startling visual play is finally abandoned at her moment of *anagnorisis*.

Where then, might we draw the line between practices of generic innovation, and those that are themselves 'vain'? Critique and innovation are both compatible with the ideal of dramatic myth, but the latter does demand a basic respect or recognition for the established use-values of the form deployed. Self-distinction, on the other

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[19] Ian Parker, "Look under the bonnet", *The Observer Review*, 8 Nov 1998, 11.

hand, simply proclaims its own individuality, disrupting the very pleasures with which it tantalises, but apparently without a higher ideal as its justification. *Vanity Fair* did not seem to know which camp it wanted to be in (nor sometimes, who it wanted to attack), and like the proverbial tightrope walker it trod the dividing line itself: dipping one foot one side, then the other. Its images were often witty and arresting, but what sometimes seemed challenging and provocative at others seemed merely gratuitous. The initial impact of certain undeniably powerful sequences (such as Becky's 'comeuppance', and say, a lingering brutal shot of footsteps on the Waterloo battlefield) was undermined by the absence of a consistent moral position with which the viewer might identify. This in turn meant that even the most contemptible of characters failed to attract a sense of recognition, instead they tended to meld together into a fairground freakshow of which the viewer was being offered a titillating glimpse. Arguably, the social parade was so extreme that it merely underlined our own sense of normality and defeated the serial's ability to be open and questioning. Although its chief ambition was clearly to dismantle the pleasures of the 'typical' period piece, having unmasked the costume shaman (and surpassed it in spectacle and flamboyance) *Vanity Fair* then found itself with little to say in its stead.

5.3 Our Mutual Friend

In marked contrast to the attention-grabbing solicitations of *Vanity Fair* had been the gradual, oblique exposition of *Our Mutual Friend* earlier the same year. Admittedly,

this serial had the relative luxury of playing in a BBC2 'serious drama' slot (Monday at 9pm), and so was spared the obligation to galvanise the best part of a Sunday night audience. Yet it still inherited the burden of expectations, not least because the channel's previous adaptation of *Martin Chuzzlewit* had been a great success, attracting a 21% share and peer group approbation. In the event, *Our Mutual Friend* managed to sustain an average audience of 3.3 million viewers, exceeding the usual reach of the slot. Tradition also had a part to play in generating anticipation: Dickens being so intimately implicated in a particular sense of national history and identity that his works come replete with cultural baggage. In his study of such issues, Jeffrey Richards proposes Dickens as a truly great and "universal" author, primarily because his works have spread throughout the English speaking world, and have been continually reinterpreted to articulate the specific cultural considerations of each era (Richards 1997). The first of these claims is faintly reactionary, not least because it fails to recognise the imperialist missionary zeal that facilitated Dickens' global reach. The second is arguably more accurate but contradicted by Richards' later description of certain post-war films and performances as 'definitive' when both the universal values he champions and the aesthetic criteria he deploys are intimately involved with the tastes and preferences of his own generation. Actually, there can be no such thing as an 'unsurpassed' production - Dickens' strength lies in the fluidity of his blend of social realism and mythology, and it is for this that his works provide such scope for dramatic, metaphoric regeneration.

For nearly two centuries, Dickens has enjoyed a unique relationship with drama, quite apart from his own reportedly performative readings. During the 1830s and '40s, stage versions of his works were appearing before the original serialised novels had

even been completed, and spawned what Bolton calls a whole "dramatizing industry" (1987:3). The Dickensian oeuvre has consistently been the most adapted, performed, and revived of any English author and television has endeavoured to prove itself a worthy medium: between 1950 and 1994 for example, there were some 33 versions of Dickens' novels.[20] Early works such as *Oliver Twist* have experienced some periodic fluctuations in popularity, but the only consistent exceptions to this formidable desire to dramatise are the later novels, notably *Our Mutual Friend*, his final complete work that was serialised between 1864 and 1865. Dark, dense and complex, it did not lend itself well to stage versioning, and suffered further when long productions (of many scenes and sets) fell out of favour at the end of the century. From 1900 onwards, even dedicated Dickensians preferred to tackle other works, and those productions that did take place, often only consisted of selected sketches from the novel.[21] Only two films are on record as ever having been made: *Eugene Wrayburn* (Thomas A Edison, 1911), and another silent feature in 1919; so it was only really the advent of radio and television broadcasting - with its relative luxury of time, and capacity for weekly serialisation - that put the book on the dramatic map. Even so, most have been radio readings or adaptations, and apart from the televisation of some 'educational excerpts' (1958), there were only two previous television versions: in twelve episodes (1959), and seven episodes (1976).[22] So in many respects, this 1998 attempt to dramatise in just four parts was a brave venture, encumbered by a formidable Dickensian tradition

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[20] Source: Baskin (1996).
[21] Short pieces such as *Mr Boffin's Secretary* (1902), *Mr Venus Shop* (1908), and *Silas Wegg's Stall* (1908) are the only documented stage adaptations of this era.
[22] Source: Bolton 1987.

yet, like *Vanity Fair*, at least free from association with previous 'definitive' dramatisations.

Undoubtedly, the motive inspiring the dramatisation was more public service than populist, and the serial sought to differentiate itself both aesthetically and educationally, although the pre-publicity typically avoided mentioning the Corporation's old ambition to democratise literary culture. Unusually for a post-watershed drama, transmission was accompanied not just by the usual commercial release of a home video, but by a website and publication of an educational booklet, expressly designed to explore the social history alluded to by the serial. Although there was no claim to be reproducing the factual truth of actual occurrences, *Our Mutual Friend* was certainly designed to evoke an authentic sense of 'being in *a specific* time'. The paradox here is that this period is also an already heavily mythologised one, not least because of the impact of Dickens' own creations. In her study of late Victorian London, Judith Walkowitz explores the formation of the city's identity within English culture, and argues that concepts of "sexual danger" are inseparable from the idea of London as a dual space in which proper society is contrasted sharply with the city's teeming underworlds. Although ostensibly a pioneer of social and environmental reflexivity (and an early Liberal Realist), Dickens made a powerful contribution to this *popular* memory of London as two conflicting territories: "The literary construct of the metropolis as a dark, powerful, and seductive labyrinth held a powerful sway over the social imagination of educated readers." (Walkowitz 1992) Victorian cities subsequently came to be seen as the dense bustling epitome of contemporary conflicts, oppositions, and fears and arguably paved the way for the Modernist mythology of the city (see chapter one). The

dichotomies of ease/struggle, deserving/undeserving, nature/society, privilege/disadvantage, and so on are all pivotal to our historical understanding of the Victorian era, and of course they are all essentially Dickensian. It is a tribute to the effectivity of this version of *Our Mutual Friend* that it still manages to make these familiar oppositions newly striking and remarkable.

One of the ways it was able to achieve this was continually to reinforce the idea of human activity as a highly situated practice with clear parallels to the contemporary world, but to do so in a way that was markedly elegiac. The serial begins with the specific: a moody, blue-lit night scene across the Thames, bells ringing, an altercation between two men in separate rowing boats over the ethics of robbing from the living. Cut to a mid-shot at street level of an elegant Nash-style terrace. Ladies mill in brightly coloured dresses and parasols. The camera pulls back slowly and moves upwards until the scene is surveyed from above, lingering as if to relish its own perspective: two cities, two social worlds. Cut again to the table of a lavish banquet, pull back again to take in the fashionable part fray and the ironic, detached conversation of two smoking gentlemen. Later, in another scene that opens and closes with shots from above, the ladies and gentlemen assemble in a formal line, muttering and responding like a Greek chorus whilst Mortimer recounts young Harman's story.

The intention here is evident, presenting two worlds that are themselves the object of scrutiny: a murky intense territory of death, economic survival and ethical conflict is juxtaposed with the sophisticated site of opposition between social mores and again, economic expedience. Like Munden was later to do with *Vanity Fair*, Farino here uses visual juxtaposition to expose an unromantic reality, the difference being that in

this case the contrast is later developed both dramatically and visually. In the sense of agency, the actions that follow often stem from position and circumstance, and care is taken to emphasise that even accidents have causes. For example, Riderhood's near drowning (in episode three) is presented as a common occurrence, the fault of the paddle steamers that serve as pleasure boats to the gentry. In other words, the initial juxtaposition serves a more sustained purpose, and the visual strategy generally is less captivated by its own wit and desire to shock than that of *Vanity Fair*. In *Our Mutual Friend*, the overall emphasis on social and economic causality also gives a particular inflection to the nature/society dichotomy woven by the serial's audio-visual topography, and I shall discuss this further below.

In order to condense an epic work whilst maintaining expositional clarity, the temptation is to streamline the narrative, excise extraneous incident and character, and even to reconstruct temporal and spatial shifts into a linear causal chain of events. Yet despite tackling a dense masterpiece of complex plotting, this version of *Our Mutual Friend* deliberately avoided such a strategy. Instead, the serial narrative seems to radiate outwards in multiple directions from its opening premise, working itself up to an intricate circular web of inter-connected relationships, plots and sub-plots. This proliferation is typically televisual, more closely resembling the conventions of soap and other long-running serial formats, than the causal development arc of Hollywood realism or the three-act play. In this case, the initial disruption – the discovery of a drowned body - is not the first link in a chain, but both premise and nucleus for a whole cluster of storylines. The body is identified as John Harman, whose death throws Bella Wilfer (his unseen fiancée), back into the 'degrading' world of genteel poverty, although it makes Mr Boffin (a dustman once employed by Harman's father)

unexpectedly rich as the next heir in line. The body was discovered by Gaffer Hexam, which gives his old rival Rogue Riderhood the opportunity to snarl accusations and generate suspicion about the circumstances. The disposal of Harman's fortune also becomes of moral and social interest to the higher echelons of Victorian society, who hear of it from Mortimer Lightwood, a gentleman lawyer who becomes involved in the investigation.

These direct consequences then ripple indirectly into the lives of others, prompting a number of secondary introductions and relationships to be formed in the aftermath of the incident. Eugene Wrayburn (Lightwood's bored and idle friend) is introduced to Lizzie Hexam, and is instantly enamoured. Similarly, the Boffins' improved status enables them to mix with new people, notably gentry, but also to employ characters such as Silas Wegg (as their private reader), and John Rokesmith (as secretary). By the second episode, an eclectic assortment of character lives have become inter-connected, not so much by six as by a mere two or three degrees of separation. Engaging eccentrics such as Wegg and Mr Venus, the bone collector, are not paraded like so many species in a zoo, but as situated agents, fully enmeshed in all that occurs. The suspicious death of John Harman is actually a mechanism by which many individuals are propelled out of their own rigid social stratum and their place in the Victorian urban hierarchy, to find themselves in strange and hitherto undiscovered territory. Class 'mobility' acts as a catalyst for a central textual opposition between 'natural' human values, and those of society. Altogether it is a rich quasi-Shakespearean mix of types, and a marked contrast to the narrow class focus that defined *Vanity Fair*, notwithstanding its occasional extra-narrative glimpses at a caricatured peasantry.

At times the opening episode is quite difficult to follow, perhaps illustrating why eschewing simplification can be a risky strategy for mainstream television. However, as the story progresses a rhetoric of visual coherency starts to take shape, effectively supplanting narrative causality with a more metaphoric schema of explanatory logic. Episode one both opens and closes with a scene in which a drowned body is recovered from the Thames, the first being 'Harman' and the second (fittingly) Gaffer himself, whose corpse is dragged to the riverside in the lashing dawn rain by none other than Riderhood. Having recently accused him of murder, Riderhood now curses his rival for denying him an opportunity to profit, having had the temerity to die by his own tow rope. Throughout the serial, the riverside (Gaffer's shack, the drab tavern, Harman's dust mounds), the narrow urban streets, and Mr Venus' bone emporium, are all shot in near monochrome, using varying gloomy shades of muted browns and greys. The water is always murky, often turbulent, and it is usually either night time or teeming with rain, sometimes both.

We are first introduced to Bella when, dressed in mourning for a fiancé she never met, she looks out of her gloomy basement home at the green potted plants outside. The scene is juxtaposed with shots of Lizzie looking out from the mud flats beyond the slum she shares with her father and brother. These parallel images of the two central female characters, trapped by their circumstances, are linked together as a formal sequence by the voice of the coroner lecturing the inquest on the injustice of Harman's death, and the dashed hopes of the young lady who had been expecting to marry him. We return then to Bella's thoughts: "what a glimpse of wealth I had and now it has

melted away". Later, she confesses that she has come to love money, and to want it "dreadfully".

Before long, colour (in the form of vivid costume, flowers, fruit, and garden foliage) has come to seem synonymous with wealth, privilege and pleasure, feeding into the visually metaphoric schema that supports the dominant theme of class conflict and division. Aside from the token green plants that seem to mock Bella with her lost fortune, the only verdant signs are in the grand parlours or gardens of high society parties, a world into which Bella is thrown thanks to the patronage of the Boffins. Symbolically, it is also a plant that the near bankrupt Alfred Lammie purchases as a gift for the Boffins on discovery that he has been "mutually deceived into wedlock" with the equally impoverished Sophronia, when - along with the rest of the "deserving gentry" -- he beats a path to the Boffin's grand new front door. 'Nature', in this twilit world of recognisably Dickensian iconography, thus reveals its more benign guises only in the context of luxury. Otherwise it is either harsh (rain, storms, cold) or treacherous (the river), and these constant visual contrasts are reinforced by equally constant reminders that wealth tends to originate in muck and death. Harman's fortune is inextricable from the dust mounds whence it came, and Hexam and Riderhood both make their living by retrieving corpses from the grimy river. Mortimer and Eugene act as emissaries from the world of vivid opulence, and pay visits to this netherland reality of squalor and darkness. In fact, an early visit to the mortuary obliges their carriage to follow such an interminable labyrinth of narrow blue-lit streets replete with the poverty-stricken who huddle around makeshift fires, that Eugene is driven to declare that "We shall fall over the edge of the world if we do not stop soon!"

Throughout the first two episodes, all glimpses of greenery remain carefully restricted, but about half way through the serial the nature metaphor begins to be utilised more extensively. The first signal that the diegetic landscape is about to expand comes at the very end of episode two, when Lizzie seeks refuge in a park from the schoolmaster, Mr Headstone, who is bent on declaring his strong feelings for her. Although the next episode, like the very first, opens with another body being hauled from the river, on this occasion it is Riderhood and, contrary to expectation, he survives. Like several other characters he subsequently makes an allegorical journey up river to the countryside, finding himself a more respectable position as a lock keeper, still living by the river, but now with grass and fields stretching from the door of his cottage. Thanks to the financial assistance of the Boffins, Mrs Higdon, (a proud old lady, now bereft of all her family), has also made her way up to these picturesque rural parts, as indeed has Lizzie. The lush, verdant scenery clearly disrupts the dichotomy of alternate drabness and decadence that have dominated so far, although its full significance only really becomes clear once Eugene arrives in pursuit of Lizzie. Only in this third domain where nature is left largely to its own abundance, where they are free of the tyranny of the urban caste system, and removed from their profoundly and also *visually* incompatible worlds, might their relationship have some chance.

Eventually, Rokesmith (really Harman) and Bella find love of their own volition and their intimate wedding is followed by a montage sequence showing their unrestrained delight, again in the verdant surroundings of a city park. But it is really the countryside that provides the main site of resolution, and the river that plays a symbolic role in meting out justice within the topographical (and cosmic)

infrastructure. It is in this pastoral world that Headstone finally attacks Eugene; but it is also here that he is reunited with Lizzie who rescues him from the river, nurses him back to health, and agrees to marry him. Other narrative threads are resolved in this rural up-river location, ableit more brutually, as for example when Headstone and Riderhood fight to a mutual death in the deepest part of the lock. The serial offers closing promise in two river sequences. The first is a summer picnic on a grassy bank attended by the three newly happy couples (Bella/John, Eugene/Lizzie, Jenny Wren/Sloppy), as well as Mortimer and the Boffins. As the men lounge idly in a rowing boat, Eugene scorns the very suggestion that he should care for society's disapproval of his marriage. The last scene takes place at a society party on a pleasure boat, where Mortimer and Mr Tremlow are finally emboldened to speak publicly in defence of love rather than social place or propriety. The final image is of the boat's decorative lights reflected on the rippling black water.

The primary point of connection for *all* the characters and activity in this dense epic is thus the river Thames. Particularly in the sense that it carries a number of the storylines upstream to a verdant site of crisis and eventual resolution, the river is like a spine sustaining multiple narratives and an extensive character assemblage. It props up a whole metaphoric skeletal schema, as a part of which many expressionistic film techniques are deployed (particularly when John recalls his near drowning) but within which colour and location are the main organisational principles. It is according to these that each discrete world is differentiated and paralleled with others, and it locks together all the other emblematic elements in order to make dramatic sense of a complex work without the need to streamline excessively. It is an ingeniously simple

and very functional aesthetic, yet one which solves the perennial problem of clarity that often dogs the adaptation of weighty novels.

The serial nature of the original novel also provides built-in *episodic* suspense plots which overlap like a Venn diagram, and Welch's screenplay perfectly exploits the cyclical nature of each mini-mystery, positing new questions at the very moment that it answers old ones. Many of these questions are raised by the contradictions of individual characters and a narrative refusal to supply timely explanations for their behaviour. What is Silas hoping to find in the mound? Are the Lammies responsible for Boffin's change of attitude towards Rokesmith? If so, why or how is it that such a 'good and faithful servant' can be so easily corrupted? Any attempt to keep an audience abreast and alert to all these mini-mysteries concurrently would have involved juggling a dizzying palette of parallel sequences, and an excess of short scenes. Instead, Welch's screenplay opts to allocate sufficient time for the full exposition of certain storylines, whilst sustaining the others by the merest thread in the meantime. Lengthy expositionary diversions do mean that it is difficult at times to recall where an earlier plot had left off, maybe thirty screen minutes beforehand, but if anything this confusion only makes the visual schema more powerful, forcing us back to its thematic clarity and cyclical rhythms. Fully developing each story in turn also requires that crucial sequences be carefully allocated to appropriate episodes so as to sustain their own momentum and avoid overloading any one instalment. In effect it forces the production to optimise the potential of a four-episode structure, tailoring its pace to suit the rhythms of each edition.

Although these mini-mysteries actively work against the possibility or need for one central linear plot, they must still be driven to a point of convergence. The apparently intractable problems which jeopardise the romantic relationships of Lizzie/Eugene, and of Bella/John in the second and third episodes - do effectively constitute a melodramatic 'through line' (particularly when Bella and Lizzie finally meet), and this is partly responsible for sustaining interest *across* episodes and incidents. Ultimately, only the inter-class marriage of Lizzie and Eugene can enable a sufficiently satisfying point of closure to both story and theme, as well as allowing the essentially mythological proposal of social possibility. However, the potentially mawkish sentimentality of the romantic happy ending is well tempered by a continual visual (and realist) insistence on darkness and often, on squalor. 'Promise' is not some never-never land, but a social territory in which conventions may (one day) more faithfully reflect inter-subjective concerns and desires.

The utopian dimension of myth can thus be a way of exploring possibilities or alternatives, not evading them. There can be something very unsettling about appreciating that 'historic prejudices' may not be as outmoded as the period costume might appear to suggest, and one is invited to do this both by the acutely specific social injustices displayed in *Our Mutual Friend*, as well as say, by the recent resolutely humanist and de-politicised version of *Anna Karenina* (Channel 4, 2000). The range of opportunities for interpreting costume drama are far greater than often acknowledged, not least because it is often a performance-driven form. As Caughie observes:

> When it decided that film was narrative, film theory seems to have forgotten that it was also the performance of a narrative, actors

pretending to be people they were not. However much the classic serial may lovingly recreate the past with a profusion of detail, the body of the actor is stubborn: the furniture may be authentic nineteenth century, but the body of the actor and its gestures are our contemporaries. (Caughie 2000: 170)

The constant invitation to compare past and present means that encoded in all costume drama is the suggestion that – however enlightened we might like to think ourselves - the past all too often lives on in the way human subjects behave in group situations. This may not be targeted critique, but the fuzziness of mythologised time and space (even when these are technically authentic) can encourage speculation and beg disturbing questions. Need, poverty, normative prejudice, ambition, and so on may be covertly naturalised as perennial factors, but there is also the dramatic suggestion (and one that can sometimes be made more potent if shorn of the detritus of contemporary detail) that these are *causal* factors in the construction of 'evil' behaviour and 'inevitable' injustice, which is quite a radical reminder that 'history' can always recur. In the next chapter I shall explore how myth survives the temporal shift into the present and future, by looking at how three other serials each manage to mythologise reality so as to stretch beyond the expressive limitations of literal naturalism.

CHAPTER SIX

Dramatic Myths of Nature and Transformation:

Three Case Studies

The three serials I have selected for analysis here are comparable in terms of form and thematic preoccupations, and all three serve functions for which the analytic paradigm of dramatic myth is most pertinent. Actually, they provide a useful illustration of the diverse and complex ways in which television drama addresses and revisits social concerns, partly by drawing upon and re-creating highly pertinent mythologies of *space*. All three narratives are very mobile, moving through empirically verifiable and recognisable parts of Britain yet, for the most part, avoiding aestheticised clichés. Emphasising the metaphoric dimension of the three texts helps to demonstrate the highly expressive potential of setting, and reveal that quite as much as history, place can be a key determinant of behaviour and social consciousness. The topography of these works thus suggests the same preoccupation with geographical 'belonging', and the self-consciousness of British landscapes that is so characteristic of the drama of this period more generally (see chapter one). At best, there is a sense of contemplation, even of wonder, at the spaces in which we find ourselves. Because the three serials demonstrate such a wide range of narrative technique and audio-visual style, they also give the lie to essentialist ideas about the television drama aesthetic being predominantly uniform, a mere small-screen variant of 'classic realism'. I hope here to do justice to the manifold ways in which contemporary serials can externalise and express some of the latent existential contradictions of their often emblematic worlds.

6.1 *Nature Boy*

Like virtually every new drama series launched in the first few months of the year 2000, *Nature Boy* was branded and trailed by BBC Presentation as 'marking the millennium', although quite why this should be so remains unclear. In spite of the Corporation's efforts at pre-publicity, the serial received relatively few and scant reviews in the daily press. Two of the nationals that did cover it each (somewhat typically) jumped to the conclusion that it was a 'social realist' drama, and evaluated it according to corresponding criteria. It was broadly praised for its sensitive handling of 'difficult social issues' but criticised for straying too much in one scene towards heightened feeling, or what one reviewer (inaccurately) defined as 'melodrama'.[1] Its alleged breach of the *verité* tradition also irritated the *Daily Mail*, whose reviewer concluded that "social realism is all fine and dandy – but it should contain at least a modicum of realism."[2] The implied (and frustrated) expectation seemed to be for 'brutal' honesty, yet well-tempered by appropriate constraints on both action and emotion, perhaps proving the writer Bryan Elsley's view that "There is a tendency in TV drama to calm things down so that middle-class people feel comfortable."[3]

The somewhat grudging and qualified critical response that Elsley's work subsequently attracted, is a good example of the constraints imposed by the 'harsh reality' axis of liberal critique and its schizophrenic desire to modify the world by shocking it in as accessible and pleasurable a fashion as possible. Yet as I hope to demonstrate below,

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[1] Robert Hanks, *The Independent* (Tuesday Review), 15 Feb 2000, 18.
[2] Peter Paterson, *The Daily Mail*, 15 Feb 2000, 59.
[3] Quoted in "Natural Magic", *Time Out*, 16 Feb 2000, 191.

this was in any event an inappropriate paradigm within which to consider *Nature Boy*. Although it did indeed show signs of the realist tradition, the serial's aesthetic actually pushed it into far more complex territory, making it very much more interesting than anyone seemed to register. It was intentionally thus: at its point of commission the project was heralded by its executive producer as a potentially 'epic' contemporary piece of "poetic realism" that should result in "a portrayal of England from places which are not usually used for filming".[4] As it turned out, this was to be a more accurate summation than any of the subsequent coverage.

The serial tells the story of David: a teenage youth who had been put into care at a young age by his heroin-addicted mother after his father abandoned them. In happier times it was his father who had nurtured David's early love of the natural world and in adolescence, he again finds solace, inspiration and a sense of belonging with the animals and the landscape of the North East. The plot traces his journey south-wards in search of his father, and like all classical odysseys it amalgamates episodic and serialised narrative elements. Each of the four episodes takes in new personal relationships and discoveries, although an intermittently romantic friendship between David and Jenny (an environmental activist) is sustained from episode two onwards. It is a journey that takes him from a world of bullying, drugs, child abuse and delinquency, and brings him into direct contact with a number of different contemporary concerns such as chemical pollution, green-belt development, eco-protest, and genetic crop modification, each of which is privileged in a different episode. Aside from these highly topical and characteristically realist themes, there is also some social realist rhetoric being deployed in the way the issues are presented,

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[4] Reported in *Broadcast*, 19 March 1999, 2.

such as the use of news footage, blunt matter of fact dialogue and the seriousness with which it treats the struggles of everyday life.

But in spite of its 'warts and all' representation and the implicit claim to honesty, the style of direction soon pushes beyond the cliché-d framing of social problems. In fact the serial evolves a quite novel rhetoric by deploying poetic devices increasingly as it wears on, so managing to extend the boundaries of its own internal order of plausibility. An early foray into Expressionism is illustrated by shots of David, naked, in an eerie yet harmonious underwater world. At first this has a linear logic, as the shot gives way to another of him emerging from the sea at the nature reserve he frequents, but later it is used almost as an interruption to the diegesis, and the repetition of the image lends it a cumulative significance. In fact, the underwater sequence develops into a motif, an expression of David's various states of mind, occurring usually when he feels trapped or distressed. In this instance it is followed by a shot of himself as a child, before he is swiftly recalled to the present by Fred, the reserve warden. It is the first of many scenes and images of the young David, sequences that are not simply narrative flashbacks, but subjective emotional references to the young self that still informs his daily actions. As circumstances begin to trigger more and more recollections, the father of his memory also takes an increasingly active role in the screen action, often ghosting David's own present-day activities such as catching wild fish, or stealing from a corner shop. This implies a sense of destiny that is underlined further by those who tell David he is "just like" his father. Gradually, the flashbacks become less clearly demarcated from the present day diegesis, and in episode three, this world of inner consciousness spills over so that the present-day David even holds shot-reverse-shot dialogues with his imagined father, although

carefully, the two actors are never framed together. By episode four, David's subjective world becomes almost indistinguishable from narrative action and he starts to see his father's face everywhere, all of which serves to heighten the urgency of his search and lend impact to his ultimate discoveries.

This draws quite strongly on Expressionist film techniques – indeed, David's subjective world is a very good illustration of what Paul Coates and others have dubbed "the uncanny". Coates modifies (and somewhat metaphysicalises) this Freudian concept to denote an emotional aesthetic exemplified by Büchner's "Lenz". In this short story the protagonist also embarks on an allegorical journey, during which he "lives amid afterimages generated by a sense of loss", and continually encounters his split self (Coates 1991: 8). In one respect, the uncanny is the product of a mismatch between external reality and subjective experience, often mutating as "frustrated allegory, negative symbol", all of which accurately describes the persistent sense of disjuncture by which David is haunted.

In addition to psychic dialogues and the clearly figurative underwater sequences, the serial is also steeped in symbols, many of which underpin superficially literal actions and objects. For example, David is quite capable of surviving off the land, and frequently makes gifts of the fish and rabbits he catches by primitive methods. In episode three he leaves a few outside the camp of some environmental protesters, one of whom ironically greets the gift with vegetarian squeamishness, even though their diet otherwise consists of out-of-date food from supermarket bins. In an early scene, David is told by an old neighbour that his mother throws away the fish he leaves at her door - a highly symbolic action as she is then shown to choose heroin in preference to

David's offering of natural bounty. Because these are highly *laden* offerings, she is of course also rejecting her child's gestures of love. Trevor Whittock has described this type of highly significant and dramatically functional object as "the formula" of a particular emotion, and he suggests that we re-deploy T. S. Eliot's concept of "objective correlative" in order to describe the metaphorical value they can acquire, particularly through repetition (Whittock 1990:14). The emphasis on evoking emotion makes the coinage rather useful, not least because it shows how recurrence of a figurative device can become almost rhythmic, and so approximate the sort of sub-conscious pattern that led Lévi-Strauss to compare myth with music for its sensory and visceral experiential qualities.[5]

Metaphoric images of entrapment are also frequently juxtaposed with landscapes and the suggestion of liberty. In the third episode, David arrives at the site of an endangered forest, where Jenny is digging tunnels for the protesters to lodge themselves and so prevent a proposed airport development from going ahead. At first David deliberately distances himself from the activists who, he observes, are destroying the very habitats they are defending, but when the bailiffs finally arrive his overwhelming instinct is to be with Jenny, and they barricade themselves underground. It rains relentlessly and the primary tunnel begins to collapse, prompting two others to abandon the strategy, but Jenny will not capitulate and David follows her down into a spur tunnel that has yet to be reinforced. Alone in this confinement, they seem to enter a space which transcends social reality. Bathed in orange light, and watched only by their precious photographs of absent loved ones, they eventually make love. Before long, the tunnel caves in, and amid the falling earth their hands clutch and are

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[5] As discussed in chapter four.

separated. The shot then dissolves into another underwater scene[6] which shows David as he panics to save Jenny from drowning. This gives way to a raw, immediate shot of David's writhing, screaming naked body from above as it is dragged out of the ground and carried aloft by half a dozen men in regulation fluorescent yellow coats. The motion slows, the camera resumes eye level contact with David's distressed face, and the first bars of the folk song that is the signature score (sung by Beth Orton) intervene to link the sequence to the end of episode credits.

The sequence is of great narrative significance because it represents the consummation of Jenny and David's relationship, and provides both an episode cliff- hanger and the dramatic crisis point of the serial as a whole. Yet it is also clearly and insistently operating at a stylised poetic level. The visual contrast of naked bodies with brown earth has a highly primal resonance, underlining that David and Jenny are vulnerable and powerless animals whose only option of resistance is to embed themselves in the ground. But they are not earthworms, and the tunnels made by Jenny's industry are susceptible to the rain: another variable of 'nature'. The tearing forth of David, screaming and crying for Jenny left behind emphasises that liberty under these circumstances is worthless to him. The imagery encompasses the archaic metaphoric duality of life/birth with death/burial: nature gives, but it can also take away.

Nature Boy thus deploys expressionism, symbolism, allegory and metaphor in order to create a poetic meta-text that gives a sense of unity and overall design to the sequence of events. As with *Our Mutual Friend*, this orchestrated meta-text becomes an audio-visual representation of the cosmic order implied by the action. However, it proposes

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[6] Perhaps a "substitution metaphor" in Whittock's coinage.

a slightly different configuration of the nature/society dichotomy, and one that is worth considering a little more closely. At the beginning of episodes one and two, there are a number of montage sequences clearly designed to illustrate an ideal of natural harmony within which David is an integral part. Human beings sometimes dangerously intrude on this balanced world, such as for example, the crisis point of episode one when various youths come to the nature reserve. However, this is no picturesque Arcadian idyll but, as David says: "there's a reason for everything here, no matter how cruel it is". Above all, the natural world is one of strict laws, and human activity is defined more by its incomprehension of these than by any deliberate attempt to sabotage them. The human world and the botanical/animal kingdom are rarely juxtaposed simplistically – the camera often pans seamlessly from one to the other, and David manages to belong yet remain something of an outsider in both. He gets along with people of all types: he is never dysfunctional, just different. The conflict between the two domains is often generated by David himself, when he brings nature (and its logic) into the human worlds of industry, science, or politics.

'Nature' here is not a thematic appendix, but a whole system of cosmic, causal logic for the diegetic world, an infrastructure (or *super*structure) that is regularly reaffirmed by the rhythmic reiteration of certain images. The serial often stretches plausibility in order to show natural causality as 'poetic justice' in this dramatic context: for example, David's foster father is attacked by the parrot he keeps for his own selfish pleasure, and gulls attack the school bully during a visit to the island reserve. This begs the question as to whether or not natural order is a viable counterpoint to moral laws, and/or whether it can be a secular substitute for a metaphysical, supernatural design. This is a pivotal post-Darwin problematic, and according to Adam Phillips'

recent reassessment of both Darwin and Freud, it is the very "question that haunts their writing" - "how does one take justice seriously if one takes nature seriously?" (Phillips 1999: 10). Later he adds:

> ...nature, as they describe it, is law-bound, but human nature is radically unpredictable ... And just knowing about evolution – or believing in unconscious desire – doesn't tell us what to do (next). (ibid... 22).

It is to *Nature Boy*'s credit, I think, that despite its poetic licence, it does not simply propose that justice is co-extensive with nature, but instead actively embraces this moral vacuum. David is wise to nature, but never sanctimonious. Indeed, his journey is a metaphoric quest for guidance as to how best to live in the human world. One reason the text is able to propose such a complex opposition between nature and society is through the presentation of multiple subject positions which, as I showed in chapter one, is so characteristic of television drama. Even though David is quite unusual in serial drama in so far as he is a loner, a wandering protagonist and not part of a consistent ensemble, the director here quite typically eschews the use of cinematic point-of-view shots in favour of the televisual two-shot, which in turn facilitates a more neutral position towards dialectical exchanges.

This enables the text to imply contradictions. At one point there is an exchange between David and Ted, the under-sheriff responsible for the eviction of the eco-warriors. Ted is a perceptive and ambivalent figure, a regular appreciative visitor to the threatened habitat. But he is not one to challenge a decision that has been passed by the council, because as he tells David, it is "democratic, you have to go along with

it". When David simply asks "why?" the older man responds: "Well, people like to go on holiday, they want to fly their planes here, there and everywhere – they don't want to sit by the lake. People spread out in the world – in a way it's the most natural thing". When David queries "*Natural?*" Ted simply replies "I think so".

Again, this is very post-Romantic. To return to Phillips:

> Since we ourselves are natural – made of nature's forces – Freud, like Darwin, can't seem to get away from an absurd image of 'Man' as the animal who is always trying to master what he has always already been mastered by." (Phillips 1999: 20)

It is the nagging quandary that "man's" social and political ambitions are as 'natural' as his other instincts. Because of this, it is not enough for David to make sense of himself as a biological creature, he must also unearth his family identity, establish his roots and find or make a place in the social world of human inter-relationships. In a loose sense, these are *cultural* imperatives, and they are not simply about self-gratification. The search for ways to live his life must take him beyond the natural order of things, but he is still an instinctive creature, disinterested in politics or immutable moral principles. As his father later points out, they are both runaways who tend to flee tricky emotional situations, and so from a psychoanalytical perspective, his journey is the process he must go through to learn to stop running. It is also perhaps a metaphoric pursuit of reconciliation more broadly: between our rural past and urban present, between the desires of the individual and the bigger eco-picture. The repeated use of folk and choral music within highly modern contexts (such as the protest site) works to reiterate a sense of loss for a disappearing English tradition and landscape, but this is no *Cider With Rosie* lament for an agricultural

haven. David is young, haunted by his personal past but intensively aware of the immediacy of his surroundings: his characterisation suggests we have to move towards nature (whatever it is), not get *back to* it.

It is somewhat ironic, and heavily symbolic, that when David finally discovers his father, the latter is a scientist developing genetically modified crops and dying of cancer to boot. This instalment brings to a head the iconographic play on the opposition between mankind and nature: the camera's perpetual roving through verdant wilderness, industrial plant, and urban landscape. His father is living in an extremely stylised environment that is completely monochrome and excessively sanitised with no trace of spontaneous life whatsoever. His work on a new strain of 'pre-programmed' rape crops has become a metaphor for his own, rapidly disintegrating life, and both are metaphors for humankind's search for mastery. Towards the denouement the plants die and his clients (a group of Japanese and Western businessmen) leave in disgust as he begs them for more time. These are, of course, the embodiment of market forces. Control is eluding him, and appropriately he then has a relapse during which he deliriously confuses his work objectives with his struggle to get the better of his own disease. The final sequence comprises an exemplary display of mythological resolution and possibility, when David gently carries his father to a last (and mercifully fatal) swim together. This frees him to return to Jenny who is still in a coma, but he lays wild flowers on her chest and curls up on her hospital bed beside her, leaving us with a final image in which the camera lingers very briefly on her moving finger. As is so often the case with contemporary myth, the utopian imperative to posit promise requires that some of the presented contradictions have to be displaced from the public/social realm and 'resolved' by an

analogous ideal of human, inter-subjective love. I am not so sure that this avoids the political questions, as leaves them open by eschewing simplistic solutions. As the assemblage is microcosmic, it can also be read as advocating a liberal-humanist philosophy of empathy and tolerance: both of which are of course, socio-cultural values. According to Phillips' reworking of Freud, the lives of others are not "there to be known and understood" but to be "endlessly redescribed". (1999: 74)

In so far as it works through moral and social questions, yet presupposes that its role as drama is primarily to 'redescribe', *Nature Boy* is an exemplary text of its time. Yet it does still fulfil basic mythological functions of sense-making through its exposition of the natural infrastructure, and the suggestion of promise in the form of human love and perseverance. Moreover, it does not obviate the need for agent intervention: in episode two for example, David and Jenny are instrumental in blowing the PR smokescreen of Blaxco, a dangerously polluting chemical factory. Importantly, the serial manages to mix styles and draw on rich dramatic traditions that essentialist theories of televisual form (as literal, prosaic and irredeemably naturalistic) would have as incompatible. After the concluding episode one reviewer did, to his credit, revise his earlier hasty judgement on the serial, pointing out that "those who went to bed early all those Mondays ago have missed an absorbing, gently paced and surprisingly romantic treat."[7] That *Nature Boy* should otherwise have received so little recognition for its display of the *poetic* possibilities of mainstream television once again suggests that the biggest problem we have is not a surfeit of bad television, but a poverty of adequate critique.

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[7] Matthew Bond, *The Daily Telegraph*, 7 March 2000, 47.

6.2 The Last Train

As noted previously, the 1990s saw two simultaneous and contradictory trends: favouring, at one end of the spectrum, the truncation of the traditional six-part serial into short and intense mini-serials, and at the other, narrative elongation into the continuing 'serialised series' format that is basically a hybrid of soap and episodic elements. This new rationalisation in response to perceived market pressures meant that the traditional "series of six" was increasingly reserved for period dramas and other prestige adaptations such as *Gormenghast* (BBC 2000). These not only had the advantages of ready-tested and developed literary characters, but in commercial terms belonged to a genre of longstanding and proven ability to command audience commitment, so justifying the risky indulgence of more extensive and slower exposition during early episodes. In this formal sense at least, *The Last Train* (Granada 1999) was a somewhat unusual instance of six part, peak-time non-renewable ITV adventure drama, giving it an almost old-fashioned feel, despite its pace and sophistication. The sense of nostalgia was perhaps heightened by the evident similarities it bore to *The Survivors* (BBC 1975), a serial that also had the aftermath of an apocalyptic scenario as its narrative premise. By managing to retain a consistent audience over 9 million for the duration of its run, *The Last Train* was also a timely reminder that the televisual epic could still command a hugely popular and loyal following.

Episode one introduces a number of characters each of whom, for individual reasons, catch a particular train that happens to be on route from Euston to Sheffield during a

global disaster. On board is Harriet Ambrose who is carrying Ministry of Defence supplies of "micro-particulate suspension", a compound designed to enable key military personnel to sleep through the worst of any national environmental crisis. But this happens even sooner than officially anticipated when an asteroid hits Zambia, its impact effectively annihilating the known world by causing it to ruck up like so many folds in a carpet. Thanks to Harriet's supplies of what she later refers to as "magic fairy dust", the passengers of her carriage are also sent to sleep in a state of frozen muscular entropy, and when they awake after what she at first believes to be only a few weeks (yet they later discover to be over 50 years) the world is a changed place.

The opening sequence deploys what are now recognisable as classic 'disaster movie' exposition techniques, by collecting together the assemblage for the narrative that follows. Apart from Harriet there is a young black man on the run from a robbery (Mick), who is recognised by a white police detective (Ian Hart) travelling to be with his wife as she goes into labour; a newly pregnant young woman (Roe); an Asian mother (Jandra) who has just fled her violent husband with her two children (Anita and Leo); as well as a kind and motherly middle-aged woman (Jean); a decent and responsible widower (Austin), and a suspicious, besuited businessman (Colin): all of whom are white with different regional accents. Emblematic diversity aside, the collected personalities form a characteristically incompatible group who, over the episodes to follow must, quite literally, learn to live with each other in pursuit of a common trajectory. As the sole survivors of the pre-apocalypse world, their function is undoubtedly microcosmic, and the central conceit to the serial was made explicit in the programme trailer, which bore the legend: "Ordinary people against all odds". A limited spectrum of human responses is illustrated, from the initial instinct to private

self-preservation (illustrated by Mick's early and aborted attempt to go it alone declaring "we just sat on a train together, I don't owe any of you anything") to later examples of selfless altruism (in the end, Mick willingly sacrifices himself for the others). The journey they each make is towards a shared sense of common good, and they become bound by mutual duties and responsibilities that transcend individual need. The device of a diary, written by ten year old Anita and relayed in voice-over, is used as a collective voice, a means of articulating their predicaments directly and naively. As a morality tale of social and public spirit, *The Last Train* is quite possibly a quintessential example of the potential of television drama to reify community values. When interviewed prior to transmission, the writer Matthew Graham said his brief had been to develop a serial which put a group of characters through "hell and high water" for six weeks, and he added: "My survivors had to be ordinary folk. They had to be run-of-the-mill people with run-of -the-mill dreams and ideals. The sort of people that life passes over. The last folk in the world you'd expect to become heroes."[8] Apart from being a characteristic conceit of its time,[9] the ordinariness of them all also lends the serial a degree of plausibility, particularly when they voice their scepticism of Harriet's first account of what has happened. Clearly the audience is being encouraged to share the disbelief with which they greet her scientific jargon about asteroid "SD426", and therefore to continue identifying with them as they are gradually convinced by the credibility of this explanation.

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[8] From a Granada press release and reported for example, in *The Evening Post* (Bristol), 7 April 1999, 21.

[9] Most obviously in people-led documentaries and social experiments such as *The 1900 House* (Channel 4 1999) or *Castaways* (BBC 1999/2000), and even ridiculed by comedy spoofs such as *People Like Us* (BBC 1999).

A joint mission is established quite early on when the newly formed community agree to find an MoD bunker where Harriet's lover Jonathan is supposed to be holed up, frozen, and waiting. When, in episode two, they discover this to be empty and virtually destroyed, they all set off for 'Ark': an elite underground sanctuary in Scotland, where Jonathan may have gone. The religious connotations here are far from superficial because, as I shall illustrate later, the journey is a stridently allegorical one. In fact, the whole serial, particularly the denouement, is infused with Christian symbolism.

The journey to Ark does indeed oblige them to go through a great deal just as Graham intended, and subsequent episodes are structured and paced around their periodic confrontations with new obstacles. At first there are very immediate and fundamental dangers (wild dogs; a lack of clean drinking water, food, transport and fuel) and they are constantly shocked by the discovery of annihilated landmarks such as Sheffield city centre, and the bridge over the river Clyde. A common enemy is soon introduced: an apparently wild and barbaric tribe who hunt down and recapture one of their members (Hilde, a young pregnant girl) who sought the others' protection after befriending Anita. Once they learn of the existence of others, the survival premise takes on a broader social analogue, for they must marry the exigencies of independent group survival with the competing demands of a culturally diverse and hostile environment. Interestingly, the goal of reaching Ark seems to obviate any speculation about the desirability (or point) of survival in an unpleasant and unrecognisable world: modernist existential angst is dispelled at one fell swoop by a quasi-religious Darwinian survival instinct. Although nostalgia for the lost world permeates the action throughout, they

are each obliged by present dangers to grieve quickly for the loved ones who, as they struggle to appreciate, would have actually been dead for many years.

Tension, pace and suspense are continually maintained by fast cross-cutting between simultaneous events. Although the train survivors are a discrete group, they are infrequently shown as a monolithic entity: more often they split into twos and threes, have different experiences and inter-personal, intimate dialogues, and then re-group. Inevitably, friendships and sexual relationships are forged by individuals, notably Jandra and Hart, and later, Mick and Roe. Occasionally but significantly they are all obliged to join forces and a symbolic example of this comes at the beginning of episode four, when they literally all pull together on a pulley they have constructed in order to winch the injured Jandra from an old mine shaft.

Both tension and symbolism reach their intense apex during the dramatic crisis that occurs once they finally reach Ark in the last episode. By now, Anita has been kidnapped by the hostile group who are equally determined to gain entry to the bunker as they believe that Hilde's baby will perish if born outside. The central group reciprocate this aggression, unaware that their motive is simply to safeguard their tribal progeny, and Mick selflessly stays behind to mount a defence whilst the others gain entry using Jonathan's MOD swipe card. After a struggle, and thanks in part to Colin's deliberate sabotage of the escape route, the doors lock leaving Mick and Austin to the mercy of their barbarian opponents. Inside the high-tech fortification, interpersonal conflicts (Roe and Colin) and private trajectories (Harriet searches for Jonathan) are intercut rapidly with shots of the rest of the group who, unable to find a way to help, are obliged to watch helplessly on giant satellite screens as Mick and

Austin are each nailed to a (diagonal) cross as a symbolic warning to them. It makes for a striking, "cinematically" mediated image: a black and a white man being martyred against a bonfire-lit dark night, calling out to the others that they are not to give up their sanctuary whilst consoling themselves privately with fantasies of rescue. The pace is kept up: Hilde has now gone into labour making entry an increasingly urgent imperative for the opposition, and in the labyrinths of Ark, Harriet is finally reunited with Jonathan - the sole surviving occupant and now a very wizened old man - who believes her to be a ghost. She is finally able "to do something for him", and so kindly and gently puts a pillow over his face.

"I'm not a religious person" weeps Mick whilst Austin quietly dies, but "I believe in Roe". This is a direct expression of the serial's secular moral order: the resurrection of the martyred depends wholly on the offices of *human* love and compassion. Hearing this, Roe throws open the doors of Ark and rushes to the foot of Mick's cross, pleading for mercy. "We had to" do this, explains a tribesman as they bring down the crucifix "this child can't die, its more important than all of us". And so, in a brilliantly lit sequence, Hilde struggles to give birth inside the Ark and the crucified man is kissed back to consciousness. For the first time, the camera lingers on the sad and apparently gentle faces of the rival survivors, and Harriet explains that they are the children of the select few who, like Jonathan, had been frozen, yet unlike him, had left there forty years earlier: they are "the children of Ark". The two warring tribes are reunited just as the first of the next generation robustly cries its way in to a newly hopeful world.

Quite evidently, this entire final sequence is a secularised reconstruction of the Christian myths of necessary crucifixion, resurrection, and the hope of a messianic birth for a human race otherwise doomed for (self) destruction. Thanks in part to the order of logic and pace carefully established by the preceding episodes, all this heightened emotion is actually plausible, and in the context of trials and tribulations past, carries considerable dramatic force. Admittedly this was not a verdict shared by Gary Bushell, who lamented the "corny" conclusion to what had been implausible nonsense.[10] Without underestimating the other contributors, if the final scene worked at all (and for many it did) its experiential power was primarily due to Graham's shrewd and reflexive reworking of myth and allegory.

Of all the texts selected here for analysis, *The Last Train* is the most transparent example of mythological 'wish fulfilment' (discussed in chapter four), or to reiterate in Fredric Jameson's terminology, it is the text that most brazenly displays its own "Utopian dimension, that is, its ritual celebration of the renewal of the social order and its salvation, not merely from divine wrath, but also from unworthy leadership." (Jameson 1979: 27). This also implies a greater significance for the conceit of 'ordinary people'. By the close of the serial, the elite who took such pains to safeguard their future as privileged guardians are known to be long gone, and their progeny have long since had to re-write their own rules of survival. The ultimate reconciliation between these Children of Ark and the ordinary flawed folk of the old world thus has an evident class perspective. A combination of accident and tenacity enable the train passengers to defy official design and to ensure themselves a place after Armageddon. Although Austin dies, the other near-martyr, Mick (possibly the

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[10] *The Sun*, 7 May 1999, 32.

sole remaining black man in Britain) is brought down from his sacrificial crucifix so that he too can participate in the future. The triumph of people emphatically 'like us' (not merely over an imagined enemy, but over natural adversity and internal division) makes this serial quite unlike say *Jaws* (Spielberg, 1975) the subject of Jameson's seminal essay. This film, he argues, actively eliminates and suppresses the "class fantasy" of the original novel, replacing it with "a new and spurious kind of fraternity in which the viewer rejoices without understanding that he or she is excluded from it." (1979: 29). Quite early on in *The Last Train* there is a brawl between Hart and Mick which they abandon once they realise that the old rules of law and order, and of (financial) crime and retribution, simply no longer count for anything. By episode six, sharing joint struggles in the name of the 'tribal' good has made these two opposing parties willing to die for each other. By contrast, the common hostility towards the privilege and official deceit of the unseen authorities never dissipates. If there is a 'baddy' in their midst, it is Colin, who betrays Mick out of personal vindictiveness and jealousy that Roe should go off "with a scraggy bit of rough" in preference to himself: a small-time corporate man who had always played by the rules.

The serial's mythological role is inextricable from its temporal and spatial dimensions. It has some of the speculative 'once upon a time' and 'never never' freedoms of traditional myth, although unlike say, much science fiction, there is no need to construct a credible futuristic planet: just a severely damaged and still recognisable one. All the technology within the bunkers is strictly contemporary, if a little overwhelming, so it is often the landscape that most eloquently expresses social anxiety. Although just about recognisable, Britain is a place made "uncanny" and thus

unheimlich[11] - a potent and very primal fear. Asteroid SD426 is an act of nature (or even supernatural retribution) rather than a man-made disaster, yet there are strong forewarnings of potential human culpability in some of its consequences. The arrival of tropical vegetation and rising sea levels suggest that this scenario is simply a more radical and rapid equivalent to slow global warming. The failure of the authorities to warn the general public and the complex provisions for the preservation only of the great and the good also bespeak highly modern fears of power and misinformation.

Like the latitude afforded by period drama in shaking off the empirical world around us (see chapter five), the temporal shift away from the present has often seemed the only way of revitalising human dramas of truly epic proportions and providing scenarios that are quite literally a matter of a whole community's life or death. However, as it happened, transmission of the serial coincided with the refugee crisis following the 1999 Kosovan War, and images of this real-time disaster even punctuated some episode in the form of trails for the nightly news. All of this made a "flow" of fictional/non-fictional images that seemed to authenticate each other's probability and severity. Mass-scale humanitarian tragedy of life and death proportions is no more the exclusive preserve of the future than it is of the past. Nevertheless, the serial was also justly accused by Nicholas Barber of lacking contemporary relevance, thanks to the ebbing away of the very cold war tensions that had given earlier apocalyptic dramas - such as *Threads* (1984) - their edge: "Presumably run by Virgin Railways, *The Last Train* has arrived 20 years too late."[12]

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[11] "In the moment of the uncanny the apparently familiar reveals its unfamiliarity: the *heimlich* melts into the *unheimlich*", Paul Coates (1991: 7)
[12] *The Independent*, 11 April 1999, 9.

Catapulting the assemblage into an *instantaneous* future by an ellipsis of fifty years allows for frequent analogies to be drawn with the audience's present as this is identical to the characters' very recent past. On the one hand, the construction of their erstwhile (and our present) home as "unhomely" offers considerable opportunities for identification with their sense of immediate loss. However on the other, it is clearly very difficult to replicate nostalgia for the here and now, not least because it is the present that is often perceived as having destroyed a kindly bygone age. The serial's inspired solution is to deploy evocative images of a contemporary world that is either already anachronistic or rapidly disappearing: in episode one for example, the new accomplices pick their way around the shell of an old-fashioned Northern sweet factory. Similarly, much of episode four takes place in an old 1950s style holiday camp, and at one point the camera takes up Ian's consciousness: showing images of children playing, and linking the sequence aurally with a smoochy, non-diegetic, post-war version of "Moon River". The contrast between these sequences (that are clearly nostalgic for us as well) and the hyper-modern technology of Ark draws an unsettling parallel between the diegetic present of the characters and the present of the audience's world – if only because there is nothing at all futuristic about this old/new opposition. At risk of being impressionistic, it is worth noting that the sense of nostalgia and loss is far stronger than any real sense of fear about the future, in spite of the allusions to wholly relevant issues such as technology and climate. This might well endorse my earlier suggestion that place and community, and not time, are the key characteristics of the late 1990s "structure of feeling". As Barber asked in his review: "is there actually such a thing as millennial tension to tap into?"[13]

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[13] ibid..

Nevertheless, the fantasy of societal reinvention still managed to inspire the serial's ultimate re-affirmation of certain human constants. The savage tribe that for the most part adopt the role of enemy, are recognisably our successors (usefully, they still speak English), and are finally revealed to be operating according to recognisably 'universal' codes of social behaviour: being driven to barbarity only by the need to survive as a species. The act of crucifixion is the reproduction of a past and well-known crime (or error?) of humanity, and it does ultimately give them entrance to the Ark, and provides the catalyst for reconciliation between the survivors from the old world and those born of the new.

The point perhaps is that the contrast between the two peoples (like that of the old/new settings) posits a link that is not so much between the contemporary world and the future, as a much desired means of reconnecting an already scarily altered contemporary world with its national past. 'Humanity' is the only concept that can establish this continuum. Frequently the characters revert to archaic or primitive rituals, such as lighting a funeral pyre for Jandra when she dies. Similarly, the tribe are dressed in medieval attire, take on long outmoded Saxon names (e.g. 'Hilde') and travel on horseback: they are reminiscent of a forgotten age when the exigencies of social/community survival took precedence over all else. In part, this is a matter of reassurance (if the future is circumscribed by the past it is not, by definition, unknown), but it is also a question of reconciliation. This is made emphatic at the end of the last episode with Hart's declaration that "the people we've been looking for are the people we've been running from": suggesting that the legacy of the past might also provide the key to our identity and so to our future.

Yet despite its manifest experiential and cognitive merits as myth, the serial was in some respects the weakest of the three considered in this chapter. This was perhaps because it was content to rest here, amongst what Williams called the 'fixed signs' of mythic ritual, and the least questioning, troubling or explorative. We do not know what we do not know, and this is why *The Last Train* and other comparable fictions of the future often provide a more eloquent testimony of the (disappearing) past than the complexity of the present, and so also why the hope they propose can seem inadequate. The paradox of this serial is that it is more nostalgic and less speculative than many tales that trawl the *past* for hope, because these at least are more selective about those aspects that need future reaffirmation. The clear proposal of regeneration was thus also an opportunity foreclosed, primarily because it limits the possibilities of hypothesis. Because the gathered personae are defined by loss, the world they build must be a replacement, not an improvement. The exception to this is the apparent lack of hierarchy of the group, and the implication that the elitism symbolised by Ark will not be perpetuated. Part of the problem is perhaps that the characters are insufficiently developed, and that the obstacles they encounter are too literally practical. Mick's early selfishness, Jean's compassion, Jandra's maternal sacrifice and so on, make up the various components of the group's dynamic but with the exception of Mick (redeemed by the love of a good woman) their personalities are surprisingly stable and two-dimensional. Bizarrely, their experiences seem to bring few psychological or social adjustments beyond 'pulling together' which, in a story about transformation and 'growth', would seem to be a fairly serious problem. What the *Daily Telegraph* referred to as "a conspicuous absence of engaging characters"[14]

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[14] 8 April 1999, 46.

effectively pushed audience attention back to the plot and, as already noted, this lacked resonance because it relied upon bubbling temporal anxieties of which there was little public evidence at the time. The serial also seemed reluctant to explore the alchemy of *inter*-relationships in different contexts, which of course is part of the *raison d'etre* of the group-oriented ensemble piece. Certainly, there is little of the sensitive attention to behavioural dynamics that had made *The Survivors* so memorable, or as I shall now argue, helped *Births, Marriages and Deaths* to excel.

6.3 *Births, Marriages and Deaths*

Transmitted in four weekly episodes during the late winter of 1999, this proved to be an extraordinarily sophisticated and stylishly imaginative example of the short-form serial. It was also densely mythopoeic, drawing heavily on both classical and contemporary narratives to weave a potent dramatic counter-myth of adult friendship. Alan, Terry and Graham have reached forty but have been friends since childhood, and a succession of early scenes shot in or against their old school playground serve to reinforce the idea that their behavioural patterns have little altered since then. They tease and egg each other on with boyish glee, and continually forge and break minor alliances amongst themselves: Terry the popular middle man, Graham the whipping boy (a "lightweight" prone to confiding in his wife, Molly), and Alan the self-appointed leader, who persistently refers to himself as "Captain" or "The General", even to his wife Alex. Their domestic environments reflect their group roles and social status: although all share a working class London background, only Graham still lives in a council flat in their old manor. Terry has moved to a small urban semi, but Alan

has really 'made it' thanks to his successful patio construction business, and he is now immensely proud of his ostentatious new mansion, 'in and out' driveway and new prestige car. All of these he parades constantly, using his wealth to assert power over the others, particularly when they both go to work for him.

The narrative kicks off on Terry's stag night, during which a prank to scare Mr Astill (their former headmaster) badly misfires, but typically the full story is only later dripped in, piecemeal and in flashback. A sense of dramatic gravity to the night's events is neatly generated when, just as Terry and Pat are about to take their wedding vows, Molly makes the congregation-stunning announcement that the three had ended their pre-nuptial celebration in a brothel. This turns out to be the least of their misdemeanours when it transpires that they had shocked Astill into a fatal heart attack, and subsequently entered his house only to find the maggot-ridden corpse of his wife, still sat in her armchair. The three friends are still reeling from the incident the next day but Alan emphatically refuses to countenance the word 'murder', and not for the last time has to remind them that it was not their fault, and that they are "all in this together".

The incident marks the beginning of their joint and several nightmares launching a clear, if objectively implausible, causal chain of events. Graham, a council pest controller, is sent as part of a house clearance team to the Astill's home, where he finds and keeps all of their old school files. This leads to the later discovery that Molly had absented school at fifteen, supposedly to have an abortion, something of which Graham had hitherto known nothing. Although each of the main characters has their individual emotional journey to make, the revelation and withholding of Molly's secret

to and from the different parties provides the overall narrative continuity throughout, linking together the other births, marriages and deaths in this quirky 'extended family'. Closure is ultimately achieved after all the characters have learnt the entire circumstances: namely that Molly was raped by Alan and subsequently gave birth to a boy who was given up for adoption. But again, the full facts are dripped in during the course of the serial, and there is much dramatic capital made out of each and every character's discovery. In episode three, thanks to Graham's secret attempt to trace the young man, Joshua actually turns up at the door. Personable, good looking and successful, he is adored instantly by his mother, and soon introduced to all as her cousin. Only when Molly learns of Josh's unwittingly incestuous relationship with Alan's daughter Becky, does she reveal the identity of his father to anyone.

The other eponymous birth is that of Daisy, who arrives in the first episode to join Terry, Pat, and Pat's two sons from a previous marriage. This idyllic family unit is shattered by Pat's death at the end of the next part when she is accidentally knocked down by Alan in his beloved new Corniche. Not long afterwards, the boys' real father Peter turns up, and demands the return of his children from Terry's care, to which Alan's typically bombastic approach is to offer him money and then violent threats to leave them be. The conflict takes a sinister twist when the three go to visit Peter, and discover him hanging dead from the banisters, after which Alan quickly persuades the others that Terry has been set up to look responsible for this 'suicide'. In keeping with the macabre comic tone throughout, there follows a marvellously Orton-esque sequence in which they remove the body and try to bury it in the cement foundations of a summer-house currently under construction by Alan's firm. Because rigor mortis

has set in, the body becomes too unwieldy, at least until Alan obligingly sets about it with a mallet.

This incident also pulls the narrative self-consciously back to its point of departure, and the three take to describing Mr Astill's death as the origin of their "Curse". Like Molly's returning child and all the other long-buried secrets and hidden crimes, this notion draws overtly on classical mythology and as the final episode reaches its denouement, a fermenting mass of legendary and cinematic allusion wrenches apart the serial's ever slender veneer of naturalism. Both style and narrative causality reach their crescendo during a grotesquely melodramatic final sequence after Alan learns from his daughter that Joshua is Molly's son, Later that night, he entertains his friends at an anniversary toga dinner party, complete with real flaming torches and a table loaded with grapes and suckling pig, and whilst the camera luxuriates in decadent reds and golds, Alan typically revels in his costume and role as Caesar. As usual, he is oblivious to everyone else's sombre mood and their attempts to come to terms with recent experiences. Like Caesar, Alan is about to precipitate his own betrayal, and has a frantic exchange with Molly in the toilet, claiming himself to be 'run over' by the discovery of the handsome son he had always wanted. He also dismisses her accusations of rape: he was, after all, only fifteen. All of this is overheard by Alex, and on her return to the table, she takes a knife to her husband's throat and finally tells him how much she, like everyone else, has come to hate him. It is a powerful, tragi-comic and highly theatrical scene, shot by flickering candlelight within a frame tilted disorientatingly to the left. When Alan finally realises that the threat to his life is for real, he calls upon his friends who one by one desert the table in disgust and resentment at the hold he has had over them all these years. Molly confirms Joshua as

the Oedipal inheritor of Alan's misogyny – he has disappeared because he could not face the idea that Alan, of all people, is his father and that he had had sex with his own sister. Once Alan also inadvertently reveals that he killed Peter 'for Terry's sake', Alex and Terry follow Molly and Graham's departure.

The sheer visual opulence and exaggerated performativity of the scene is entirely in keeping with the stylistic tone of the serial, which makes continual play with vibrant colour and imagery. The performances are pitched at all times at a point of heightened realism: everyone seems to be living on the edge, and prone to manic and highly volatile behaviour. In effect, the action often operates at a highly symbolic level, allowing internal emotions to be played out externally. For example, Graham begins to crack up when he first learns of Molly's secret pregnancy, and his emotional disintegration is revealed by a scene in which he runs through the streets taking off his shirt. When Molly catches up with him, they go to a pub where he sits naked to the waist, stripped quite literally of everything he had formerly taken for granted. Later, he tries to set himself in a dustbin full of over-diluted cement, to see "how it felt".

Until the final theatrical denouement, the sheer pace of action and this sort of stylistic or incidental surprise had encouraged the idea that causality, like life, is a highly unpredictable affair. It is only at Alan's abandonment, at a point of dramatic drunken crescendo, that the full measure and nature of his personal culpability becomes clear. Left alone at his opulent banquet, the deserted leader starts to hallucinate, and like Macbeth is soon joined by his victims: Peter, Mr Astill, and later still, Pat. Alex had once observed how she had gained some of Pat's strength since her death, and now the image of Pat's blood-spattered face gives way to a closing aerial shot of Alex. In

contrast to Alan's haunted isolation in his vulgar mansion, Alex has returned to the estate where she sits on a balcony in a wicker throne singing Gloria Gaynor's anthem of empowerment, "I will survive". Freed of the spectre of Alan's domineering machismo, the others all celebrate by laughing, dancing, and playing in a quasi-Bacchanalian ritual of promise in Graham and Molly's tower block roof garden. This return to their roots is not so much about restoring a certain class of people to their 'rightful' place, as about questioning the integrity of Alan's *purely* material aspirations and constant deprecation of those he had left behind. By contrast, Terry's desire to improve his financial circumstances is never undermined – his excitement at earning some real money (via Alan) is very clearly secondary to his love for Pat. The symbolic topography of class-structured living environments does not therefore glamorise poverty, but it does reaffirm human love above worldly status, and honesty above charade, and so restates these traditional values of working class culture rather than reducing it to the problems of the socially excluded. Alan's character explodes the working class myth of the self-made hero, because as Terry observes, he quite simply 'does not get it', and for all his contempt of Graham and Molly, he can never buy what it is that they have had all along.

Alan's ultimate humiliating isolation also reinforces that he is the root cause of all their difficulties - their 'curse' is a behavioural tradition that he epitomises. This broader relevance is achieved by use of a typically televisual narrative that is driven not by psychological exploration of a protagonist, but by the exploration of character inter-relationships and social *behavioural* patterns. During the initial stag night sequence, all three men go out dressed in shades and black suits, playing overtly on the laddish mythology of films such as *The Blues Brothers* or *Reservoir Dogs*, yet it is Alan who

drives this show, and at one point is even shown stomping up and down on a table belting out "I'm the leader". Although there is some fairly tricksy framing and camera work throughout the serial, the images of Terry and Graham are rarely subverted or distorted unless they are actually with Alan, and behaving as he encourages. Unlike Alan's continual domestic conflicts, these sequences are also counter-posed by moments of sincere intimacy with their respective wives and children Similarly, allusion and reference (such as riffs from *High Noon* and other Westerns) are reserved primarily for those occasions when the three men are acting in solidarity. The serial thus also mocks that central tenet of macho mythology: the idea of a very special bond between lads.

This has a very 1990s inflection, thanks to the 'new laddishness' epitomised by the magazine *Loaded*, and films such as *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrel*s (Guy Ritchie, 1998). Actually, and with a few relatively recent exceptions, the television output of the '90s tended more actively to celebrate *female* solidarity,[15] so it is quite interesting that male bonding is shown here as destructive and based on power and fear. In whatever situation they find themselves, Alan, Graham and Terry together constitute a semi-ridiculous spectacle of operational incompetence, a parody of the *corps d'esprit* that prevails in movies such as *The Dirty Dozen*. Initially at least, their squabbling is affectionate, funny, and closer to farce than life or death, but their joint friendship (like Alan's marriage) has come to depend upon his constant bullying and re-affirmation. "In it together" usually turns out to mean 'in it with me'. Alan is actually a masterstroke of characterisation: presented as a recognisable cultural type, a

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[15] For example: *Real Women* (BBC, 1998), *Big Women* (Channel 4, 1998), *Close Relations* (ITV, 1999) and the returning serial *Playing the Field* (BBC, 1998 -).

parody of the self-made Cockney who thinks there is no problem that can not be solved with force or money. But he is developed to perfection - always slightly misinterpreting everyone else's responses to suit his own self-esteem, and often shown in distorted close-up, a grotesque rather than an identifiable figure. This too is reinforced by others' reactions: when he slips one of his own workmen a note, the builder holds it up to the light. It is precisely because he turns out to be the causal factor in all their misfortunes that at the final party, Graham is driven to exclaim: "I can't believe how I've let you control my life ... You've plagued me with misery." Later he adds to Molly: "the Devil's been among us".

The use of classical mythology, particularly the reworking of the Oedipus myth, enables the serial to undermine Alan's self-appointed elevated status. Oedipus' fate was a divine affair, a curse on the house of Atreus, retribution for his father's sins, but in *Births, Marriages and Deaths* the characters all have the capacity and the opportunity to make moral choices in spite of their circumstances. To some extent, the sins of the fathers are still passed on for as Joshua admits to Molly, there is something within him that compels him to impress others. However, in this instance the curse can be broken and Josh claims he is learning to control his instincts, and to be more honest. When he learns that Alan is his father and that Becky is his sister, he quite simply walks away from his fate. The only character who can not escape his destiny is Alan, and not just because of the original rape, for as Terry tells him, "it's not just that ... it's *everything* you do". He has been pathologically enslaved by his own aspirational beliefs, making him the embodiment of a role model deeply rooted in inner city folklore, which is itself eventually revealed as a cultural delusion. Alan's final isolation is his just comeuppance, and retribution is meted out by those he abused,

distinctively human agents who have grabbed their chance of empowerment. Because he is often a comic figure, his behaviour at first seems innocuous and readily recognisable, making his later excesses and the serial's ultimate condemnation all the more potent.

To some reviewers, the proliferate use of visual and verbal allusion did not amount to 'added value' for it was all too glossily superficial to serve the story. The first episode attracted comments such as "so slick you could go skating on it"[16], and many bemoaned the director Adrian Shergold's "weakness for excessively arty camera angles"[17], and his "layer upon layer of distracting cinema reference".[18] Although the serial's intertextuality was occasionally indiscriminate (and some allusions, such as to *Macbeth*, do not really stand up to sustained examination), these initially negative responses again show the limitations of passing judgement without fully engaging with the whole. Overall, the virtuoso direction served a substantive message; it did engage, did affect, and its densely reflexive practices were legitimated beyond doubt in the denouement. Aside from adding complexity, irony and a sort of camp humour to an already eventful narrative, these practices comprised a revisionist challenge to the ideology which has grown up around a canonical tradition of male heroes in Western culture.

To this end, the serial also has its own mythology to perpetuate, turning its unlikely scenario into a perfectly rational thesis of explanation (negative male behaviours), and

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[16] "Three Go Mad In Essex ..", *The Times*, 23 Feb 1999.
[17] "A Tale of Three Blokes", *The Daily Telegraph*, 23 Feb 1999, p 36.
[18] "Men Behaving Badly", *The New Statesman*, 26 Feb 1999, p46/7.

conclusion to *Nil by Mouth* [19], a film that also starred Ray Winstone as a more sinister and violent alcoholic, the television serial ultimately rejects the idea that male patterns of behaviour are inevitably self-perpetuating and irredeemable. This logical proposal of possibility also sets the serial apart from numerous other contemporary texts which simply record relational dysfunction as a series of arbitrary conflicts arising without rhyme or reason, to be resolved only by their own randomly destructive momentum.

Births, Marriages and Deaths steps beyond the confinement of the purely personal and offers real possibilities of inter-subjective value, and for all the criticisms of slickness, it has to be recognised that this was a highly skilled composition: visually exciting, thematically coherent, and the expositional timing of the narrative revelations always flawless. It is one of the few television serials of recent years that stands up to repeat viewing, not least because as one reviewer noted: "... even ordinariness would be a triumph when so much care has been lavished on it: every drama should be made this way."[20]

Previously I argued that the short serial is a potentially symphonic form, which implies that it should be more than a unitary drama split up into parts, and more again than the sum of its discrete episodes. The evaluation of such a lengthy yet organic text cannot be made on the evidence of either the first instalment or on the serial's final resolution. However, as repeatedly noted above, in both its academic and journalistic guises contemporary criticism seems particularly unable to cope with this uniquely televisual

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[19] (Gary Oldman, 1997).
[20] Robert Hanks, *The Independent (Review)*, 23 Feb 1999, p 18.

form. In the case of costume drama, review was most obviously compromised by prevailing pejorative wisdom as to the 'genre's' characteristic features. Yet in the case of these three serials – and notwithstanding the dead hand of realism (particularly in the reviews of *Nature Boy*) - the critical problems were as much practical as conceptual: daily newspapers simply do not have the column inches, the motive, and perhaps the expertise, to provide the sustained reflective analysis these artistic products deserve. Practically again, and barring a huge expansion in the discipline of television studies and criticism, the long lead-times and limited space of academic journals and publications may never be able to do any more than scratch the surface of the sheer volume of television output. Although it is probably our only real option, so-called 'exemplary' critique (to which, inevitably, these case studies must belong) runs the danger of ossifying (if uncontested) into those same received orthodoxies that stifle original interpretation. And so the circle goes on.

Still, there are signs of a shift, at least in the framework of analysis: a renewed academic interest in the text as an object of study for example; and perhaps crucially, a huge increase in secondary exploitation of television texts. Video, of course, has given the serial a life beyond transmission, as too have all the re-run, 'second chance to see' and 'golden' drama channels that cable, satellite and digital are beginning to provide. For the first time in television history, the distribution opportunities for programmes might potentially exceed production capabilities - indeed, this is already the case with the sort of high-cost, labour-intensive quality serials discussed above. Rather than surfing mindlessly or being 'overwhelmed by plenty' as feared, it is equally possible that the next generation will become increasingly selective and reflective about proportionately *fewer* texts. Moreover, these texts may well become increasingly

demarcated and accessible outside of the flow of broadcast. It remains to be seen if television can sustain its frisson of immediacy and its sense of event, although the ultimate resilience of cinema might reassure that there will always be satisfaction to be had from watching something new, watching in context, and watching at the same time as others.

CONCLUSION

"Where am I to go, Mr Walsh? I am only from one place."[1]

A key ambition of this project was to marry up three distinct objectives: a systematic review of new British terrestrial drama *as it happened*, specific textual analysis, and an applied exploration of the evaluative possibilities available to us. The objective was never to arrive at a conclusive terminus, for in so far as solutions are ever possible perhaps the most that could have been hoped for was a new slant on the old question "What is good about TV?" After all, it is an impossible question to address if we are eternally stuck on all that television is not, or on all that we imagine it used to be. The irony perhaps is that by the end of the twentieth century, the television industry had already squared up to a future in which the medium's distinctive serial qualities and collectivising, ritualistic functions will soon have to be recaptured by wholly different means.

Conceptually, there can be no definitive point of balance between all the hoary dichotomies outlined in chapter two: no way of ultimately reconciling the tensions between subjective taste and measurable objectivity, or between paternalism and populism. Nor can there be any absolute end to the process of debate and contention to which the methods and criteria of criticism must be subject. However, what *is* achievable is the discursive practice that will keep these intractable questions permanently on the agenda, and prevent the sedimentation of presupposition and orthodoxy by default. In the place of dismantled authority, other value assumptions

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[1] Mr Talzani, *Triage* by Scott Anderson, (Macmillan 1998), 23.

and dogma grow up anew, and it is precisely because these can be as inherently and unjustly prejudicial to television as their predecessors, that genuinely alternative criteria need so urgently to be articulated.

For those academics now prepared to re-enter the debate about what is good or bad, it should be apparent that the old critical positions will not do. Even the much cherished notion that good drama is challenging and 'oppositional' (in whatever post-Marxist modification) tends to belittle all that fails to be obviously subversive. The result is the inevitable perpetuation of the realist paradigm, the endless privileging of only the most unexpectedly radical texts, and a consequent dismissal of others that in all sorts of ways, are poetic, emotive, or 'merely' thoughtful. It is for the sake of the many such texts that fail the oppositional test yet represent routinely useful, and sometimes inspirational, myths that we need to consider other yardsticks of merit. What actually lies behind many contemporary discourses of radicalism (and for that matter, behind many arguments claiming the centrality of the television writer) is often – and perhaps more justifiably – a desire for importance, impact, naked honesty, or what Tony Garnett has called a sense that here is "someone's guts on the screen".[2] The foregoing have often been seen as characteristics of a certain type of realism, but are equally true of what I earlier described as 'sincere' myths.

If we look for realism, or for social or political counter-truths alone, we are after all, likely to miss much that is of value, such as the metaphoric resonance and nuance that late century television dramas have assimilated and built in to their representations of space. The insistent preoccupation with place, whether as a means to express fear and

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[2] Public panel discussion at the Arnolfini, Bristol, 8th March 2001.

foreboding or to provide a richly symbolic semantic topography, was perhaps one of the more surprising attributes of the late 1990s dramas. It was all the more evident because of the corresponding absence of 'millennial tension', because there certainly seemed to be but an infrequent awareness of the phenomenon of 'being in time': a lack of concern with what elsewhere was heralded as a profoundly symbolic juncture.

This does not mean that the serials of the 1990s had in any way loosened their allegiance to narrative cause, effect and consequence, any more than they abandoned their customary respect for historical authenticity. The so-called 'realist' logic of linear story-telling was still very much in evidence, as were many other aesthetic codes and narrative conventions long expected and familiar to television audiences. Far from being the thin end of the wedge of a 'new affective order', the aesthetic of contemporary television drama suggests a remarkable continuity with established ways of seeing. Whereas there were a few, well-documented attempts by broadcasters to win new youth or niche markets with excessively trendy or sensational opening sequences, even serials as determinedly 'different' as *Queer As Folk* (Red/Channel 4 1999) or *Tinsel Town* (Deep Indigo/BBC2 2000) soon warmed up into engaging and accessibly familiar narrative patterns. A viewer who had discarded his or her set after the last episode of *Blackstuff* would certainly notice small changes in pace, or improvements in the range and quality of the image. However, the truly 'definitive' developments in televisual style - those with the greatest ramifications for the stories told - have been with us for some time. There is nothing very 1990s about the demise of the single play, the abandonment of the 'fourth' studio wall, or the increasing liberty of outside film and landscape tele-photography, although one might well argue that these reached their fullest exploitation yet in the 'quality' serials of the decade. Rather than signalling the

triumph of the quasi-cinematic, the use of these was often characteristically televisual. *Nature Boy* was a fine example of how a tradition of blunt, dialogue-driven 'social realism' could be effectively re-mixed with greater poetic imagination and visual licence, and of how the episodic, the progressive and the conventional could together be deployed to challenging effect. One reviewer even described the serial as "a compendium of clichés that added up to something unexpectedly powerful"[3], which – however well-intended – also reveals how hastily newspaper critics point the finger at anything that comes close to resembling something they may once have seen before. It is often the mix, and not the ingredients, that makes for something special. The very fact that it is impossible to imagine a drama quite like *Nature Boy* in any other medium can be partly attributed to its use of both repetition and tradition. That which television does best might yet be made excellent.

It was useful I think, if unfashionable, to approach these serials first and foremost as dramatic art, if only because this stance implies artistic expectations that can counter both consumerist logic and preconceived ideas about dominant ideology and 'mass' production. If we believe that television drama *can* do more than gratify, or fill us up like 'junk food', then we have a responsibility to talk about it in terms that allow for richer possibilities. Some television theorists have insisted that the blurring of the medium's genres and forms, and its typical inter-textuality, suggest that any aesthetic theory needs to embrace this hybridity and should therefore be able to cut across generic divides. I would argue that although dramatic criticism needs to be ever vigilant to what is happening in other genres, it is not true that the divides have ceased to exist. Besides, any theory that might apply to the whole of television output

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[3] *The Daily Telegraph*, 19 Feb 2000, 12.

can only be of very limited use. Not only is there a surprising consistency in the modus operandi of fictional narratives, these are also surprisingly ring-fenced from other forms. Changes infiltrate, but slowly, and the evidence of the three year research period suggests that 'serious' or 'quality' drama remains an oasis of ritual in what sometimes threatens to become a desert of technological wizardry. Similarly, the characteristic emphasis on character and group inter-relationships throws into question another theorist's cliché of 'the mainstream' versus 'the margins'. Actual audience demographics can vary widely from those targeted, and the relatively 'mainstream' success of everything from *The Aristocrats* to *Queer as Folk* would evidence that characters are not identifiable to us just, or only, because they mirror our own individual age, race, sexuality or class. Encouraging empathy or solidarity with someone from another world is one of the great social contributions peak-time television can make, and the knee-jerk mistrust of emotive character identification is quite possibly one of the great aberrations of Marxist critique. The assumption that the vast majority of texts address only a constructed and homogenous 'majority' of the British public might well be another. The mainstream is itself heterogeneous.

The limitations of critical *doxa* was a recurrent issue for this study. Although I designated many of the more cumbersome critical arguments 'realist', this was because they originally grew out of that paradigm even though their influence has been far wider than the term itself would seem to suggest. The supplementary utility of the paradigm of dramatic myth should have been demonstrated by chapters five and six, which were partly an attempt to show how this can invite a wider and more positive appreciation of actual serials and that where appropriate, it can still co-exist with the criteria of realism (which as Jameson argues, are more accurately the criteria of 'representation'). I particularly wanted to rehabilitate costume drama, the critical

reception of which often demonstrates an extreme form of inverted snobbery and an almost wilful refusal to judge these texts on their own individual and collective merits. Similarly, the final three case studies should also show the sheer wealth and diversity of aesthetic and mythological strategies now available to peak time drama.

Yet it still has to be admitted that much of what I advocate (such as an emphasis on the artistic value of drama as a unique form, the trans-cultural functions of myth, and the common desirability of devices such as metaphor) could all be used to shore up the sort of canonical judgements that have been so problematised over the last thirty or so years. One has to tread carefully here – after all, the populist challenge to traditional aesthetics was in some respects a legitimate one, and as Rupert Murdoch shrewdly perceived, the charge of establishment elitism is not so easily dismissed. The compromise, I would suggest, is not to surrender altogether the concept of artistic value (still less at the altar of market demand), but actively to reconnect aesthetic value to receiver use value, as well as freeing both from the guardianship of practitioners. Art may not be measurable, but it does nevertheless serve a range of both private and collective purposes. Criticism can not separate, sort and weigh qualitative attributes but it can explore them, and it can interrogate their functions. What is sometimes called the 'alchemy' of a dramatic product (from which the whole mysteriously becomes more than the sum of its parts) is both the bane of criticism and the whole reason for its existence.

On occasion, I have also attributed some of the difficulties of television criticism to its own paucity, particularly in academic studies that have long privileged socio-political and communications theory over textual analysis. I should admit that there are some worthy exceptions to this observation – indeed the last two or three years

have seen the publication of a number of works that militate against this trend, some of which I have cited freely, and some that only became available as my research came to an end. It may be noted that I have also occasionally drawn on the very social scientific data that I claim elsewhere to have been too dominant a feature of media studies. Moreover, I would agree that further research in some such areas could greatly benefit and inform criticism, and perhaps bring it to a place it might not reach via the sort of speculative, reflective approach that I have chosen. In particular, I would support the recent call from Alan Durant (2000:14) for more rigorous research into differentiating meanings from uses and uses from effects, as well as exploring *how* meanings are produced by readers, as opposed to how texts are made 'meaningful'. If the latter could take on board the production of *collective and social* meanings rather than confining itself to individual processes of reception and cognition, so much the better.

In spite of this, I would maintain finally that in this statistic-crunching focus-group sort of a world, we still have much need of lateral musing and speculation. Whereas in the 1960s it was fashionable to demand rigour and a scientific method, recent publications such as *The Tyranny of Numbers*[4] seem now to be articulating an alternative mood. Surveys can not substitute for ideas, and facts - so we are beginning to appreciate – do not always amount to insight. Critics have to be able to hazard judgements without needing to bolster them with a statistical mandate or a methodological 'law'. Inevitably, regulators and lobbyists will prefer to monitor and measure (often to substantiate pre-existing views) but we shall continue to need those who, like viewers themselves, can simply think rather more laterally about the television fiction that they themselves use. One might therefore assume there will

always be something edifying about consulting and responding to what others have to say of the same viewing experience, and so restore these cultural encounters to a public realm that, however vicarious and discursive, at least offers the promise and possibility of being *shareable*. Again this recalls Eagleton's concept of a culture that is both diverse and collectivising, different and democratic, and suggests criticism should demand a place for television drama at the centre of a potentially communitarian public sphere. Arguably, such critical discourses remain our best hope of developing the common and identifiable values, hopes and ideals, without which we would have little but the logos and brands of lifestyle or identity to provide a means and reason for inter-connection.

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[4] David Boyle, (Harper Collins 2001).

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PROGRAMME CHRONOLOGY: AUTUMN 1997 TO AUTUMN 2000

NEW PEAK-TIME DRAMA SERIES & SERIALS

NB. This is given for contextual purposes and is intended as an illustration of the range of originations during this time. It is not fully comprehensive as imports, repeats, sitcoms, and returning/on-going serials have all been omitted. For long, returning or interrupted runs, only the date of the first episode has been given.

Programme	Channel	Day	Time Slot	Transmission Dates
1997				
The Locksmith	BBC1	Thurs	21.30	25.09.97 -
Holding On	BBC2	Tues	21.30	09.09.97 to 13.10.97
Bombay Blue	Channel 4	Sat	20.00	04.10.97 to 08.11.97
Dance to the Music of Time	Channel 4	Thurs	21.00	09.10.97 to 30.10.97
Bright Hair	BBC1	Sat/Sun	21.00	11th & 12.10.97
Trial & Retribution I	ITV	Sun/Mon	21.00	19th & 20.10.97
Tom Jones	BBC1	Sun	21.00	09.11.97 to 07.12.97
1998				
The Ambassador	BBC1	Sun	21.00	04.01.98
Looking After JoJo	BBC2	Mon	21.00	12.01.98 to 16.02.98
Heat of the Sun	ITV	Sun	21.00	25.0198 -
Mosley	Channel 4	Thurs	21.00	12.02.98 to 05.03.98
Heaven on Earth	BBC1	Sun	21.00	22.02.98 to 29.02.98
Mortimer's Law	BBC1	Fri	21.30	06.02.98 to 20.03.98
Real Women 1	BBC1	Thurs	21.30	26.02.98 to 12.03.98
Midsomer Murders	ITV	Sun	20.00	22.3.98 -
Our Mutual Friend	BBC2	Mon	21.00	09.03.98 to 30.03.98
Dalziel & Pascoe	BBC1	Sat	21.05	28.03.98
A Respectable Trade	BBC1	Sun	21.20	19.04.98 -
City Central	BBC1	Sat	20.10	11.04.98 -
Touching Evil (2)	ITV	Wed/Thurs	21.00	29.04.98 -
Berkeley Square	BBC1	Sun		10.05.98 -
The Unknown Soldier	ITV	Tues	21.00	28.04.98 to
Killernet	Channel 4	Tues	22.00	05.05.98 to 09.06.98

Out of Hours	BBC1	Wed	21.30	20.05.98 to 24.06.98
The Tribe	BBC2	Sun	22.00	21.06.98
Imogen's Face	ITV	Thurs	21.00	25.06.98 to
Big Women	Channel 4	Thurs	22.00	02.07.98 to 23.07.98
Far From the Madding Crowd	ITV	Mon	21.00	06.07.98 to 27.07.98
Amongst Women	BBC2	Wed	21.30	15.07.98 to 05.08.98
The Brokers Man	BBC1	Thur	21.30	23.07.98 to 27.08.98
The Verdict	ITV	Fri	20.00	31.07.98 -
Maisie Raine	BBC1	Tue	21.30	28.07.98 -
The Designated Mourner	BBC2	Sun	22.30	23.08.98 (single)
Mrs Bradley Mysteries	BBC1	Mon	20.30	31.08.98 (pilot)
Supply & Demand	ITV	Tue	21.00	01.09.98 to
Falling For A Dancer	BBC1	Sun	21.00	13.09.98 to 04.10.98
The Jump	ITV	Sun	21.00	13.09.98 to 27.09.98
Liverpool 1	ITV	Mon	21.00	14.09.98 to 19.10.98
Ultraviolet	Channel 4	Tues	22/23.00	15.09.98 x 6
Undercover Heart	BBC1	Thurs	21.30	01.10.98 - 05.11.98
Hornblower	ITV	Wed	20.00	07.10.98 (and as occasional singles thereafter)
Trial and Retribution 2	ITV	Sun/Mon	21.00	18 & 19.10.98
Grafters	ITV	Tues	21.00	Nov 1998
The Cops	BBC2	Mon	21.00	19.10.98 to 23.11.98
Vanity Fair	BBC1	Sun	21.00/21.30	01.11.98 to 06.12.98
The Echo	BBC1	Tue/Wed	21.30	29 & 30.12.98
1999				
Bravo Two Zero	BBC1	Mon/Tue	21.00/22.00	3 & 4.01.99
The Vice	ITV	Tues	21.00	04.01.99 to 08.02.99
Tilly Trotter	ITV	Fri	21.00	08.01.99 to
The Lakes (2)	BBC1	Sun	21.30	10.01.99 to
Shooting the Past	BBC2	Sun	22.10	10.01.99 to 24.01.99
Sunburn	BBC1	Sun	20.30	Jan 1999
Holby City	BBC1	Tues	20.10	12.01.99 -
The Scarlet Pimpernel	BBC1	Sun	20.00	24.01.99 to

Harbour Lights	BBC1	Thurs	20.00	February
Births, Marriages, Deaths	BBC1	Mon	21.00	22.02.99 to 15.03.99
Great Expectations	BBC2	Mon/Tue	21.00	12 & 13.04.99
Every Woman Knows a Secret	ITV	Thurs	21.00	18.03.99 to 01.04.99
Wonderful You	ITV	Tues	22.00	16.03.99 -
Butterfly Collectors	ITV	Mon/Tue	21.00	19 & 20.04.99
The Last Train	ITV	Wed/Thurs	21.45/21.00	07.04.99 to 06.05.99
Bad Blood	ITV	Sun	21.30	18.04.99 to 02.05.99
The Blonde Bombshell	ITV	Mon/Tues	21.00	26 & 27.04.99
The Passion	BBC1	Sat/Sun/Mon	21.00	01 to 03.05.99
Trust	ITV	Tues/Wed	21.00	4 & 5.05.99
Queer as Folk	Channel 4	Thurs	22.00	March/April
The Ambassador (2)	BBC1	Sun	21.00	
Psychos	Channel 4	Thurs	22.00	13.05.99 to
Plastic Man	ITV	Wed	21.00	12.05.99 to 19.05.99
Evil Streak	ITV	Mon	21.00	17.05.99 to 31.05.99
Always and Everyone	ITV	Mon	21.00	07.06.99 to 12.07.99
Aristocrats	BBC1	Sun	21.00	20.06.99 to 25.07.99
Bad Girls	ITV	Tues	21.00	01.06.99 to 06.07.99
Hope and Glory	BBC1	Tues	21.30	22.06.99 to
Life Support	BBC1	Mon	21.30	19.07.99 to 23.08.99
Love in the 21st Century	Channel 4	Wed	21.30	July (weekly singles)
Jack of Hearts	BBC1	Wed	21.30	04.08.99 to 08.09.99
Pure Wickedness	BBC1	Tues	21.30	14.09.99 to 05.10.99
Sex, Chips, and Rock 'n' Roll	BBC1	Sun	21.00	05.09.99 to 10.10.99
Liverpool 1 (2)	ITV	Mon	21.00	September 99
Eureka Street	BBC2	Mon	21.00	13.09.99 to 04.01.99
In The Name of Love	ITV	Sun/Mon	21.00	12 & 13.09.99
Daylight Robbery	ITV	Thurs	21.00	09.09.99 to 30.09.99
Trial & Retribution 3	ITV	Thurs	21.00	07.10.99 – 14.10.99
Real Women 2	BBC1	Tues	21.30	19.10.99 to 16.11.99
The Cops 2	BBC2	Mon	21.00	11/20.99 to 13.12.99

Shockers	Channel 4	Tues	22.00	19.10.99 to 02.11.99
Extremely Dangerous	ITV	Thurs	21.00	11.11.99 – 02.12.99
Warriors	BBC1	Sat/Sun	21.00	20th & 21.11.99
Kid In The Corner	Channel 4	Wed	21.00	24.11.99 to 8.12.99
Holby City (2)	BBC1	Thurs	20.00	25.11.99 -
Wives and Daughters	BBC1	Sun	21.00	28.11.99 – 19.12.99
Oliver Twist	ITV	Sun	21.00	28.11.99 to 19.12.99
Four Fathers	ITV	Thurs	21.00	9.12.99 to 21.12.99
David Copperfield	BBC1	Sat/Sun	19/18.25	25th & 26th 12.99
2000				
Longitude	Channel 4	Sun/Mon	21.00	2nd & 3rd 01.00
Murder Rooms: The Dark Beginnings of Sherlock Holmes	BBC2	Tue/Wed	21.00	4th & 5th 01.00
Bomber	ITV	Wed/Thur	21/21.30	5th & 6th 01.00
Sunburn (2)	BBC1	Sat	20.55	15.01.00 -
Second Sight	BBC1	Sun	21.00	9th & 16th 01.00
Mrs Bradley Mysteries	BBC1	Sun	20.00	16.01.00 to 06.02.00
Gormenghast	BBC2	Mon	21.00	17.01.00 to 07.02.00
At Home With The Braithwaites	ITV	Thurs	21.00	20.01.00 to 24.02.00
Clocking Off	BBC1	Sun	21.00	23.01.00 to 13.02.00
Storm Damage	BBC2	Sun	22.00	23.01.00 (single)
This is Personal	ITV	Wed	21.00	26/01.00 & 2.02.00
Reach For The Moon	ITV	Fri	21.00	11.02.00 to 24.03.00
Nature Boy	BBC2	Mon	21.00	14.02.00 to 06.03.00
The Vice (2)	BBC1	Mon	21.00	17.01.00 -
Playing the Field (3)	BBC1	Tues/Thurs	21.30	01.02.00 -
Queer as Folk (2)	Channel 4	Tues	22.00	15th and 22nd 02.00
Monarch of the Glen	BBC1	Sun	20.10	27.02.00 to 16.04.00
The Wyvern Mystery	BBC1	Sun	21.00	5th & 12th 03.00
Dirty Work	BBC1	Wed	21.35	March/April 00
The Blind Date	ITV	Mon	21.00	13th & 20th 03.00
Monsignor Renard	ITV	Mon	21.00	27.03.00 -
Randall & Hopkirk (Deceased)	BBC1	Sat	20.55	18.03.00 -

Deceit	BBC1	Sun	21.00	2nd & 9th 04.00
Madame Bovary	BBC2	Mon/Tues	21.00	10th & 11th 04.00
Bad Girls (2)	ITV	Tues	21.00	04.04.00 -
Always and Everyone (2)	ITV	Thurs	21.00	06.04.00 -
City Central (3)	BBC1	Sat	20.00	22.04.00 -
Hearts & Bones	BBC1	Sun/Wed	21/21.30	30.04.00 to 07.06.00
Metropolis	ITV	Mon	22.05	01.05.00 to 22.05.00
Fish	BBC	Tues	21.30/22.40	02.05.00 to 05.06.00
Anna Karenina	Channel 4	Tues	21.00	09.05.00 to 30.05.00
Rough Treatment	ITV	Sun/Mon	21.00	29th & 30th 05.00
Lock, Stock and	Channel 4	Mon/Tues	21.00/22.00	29.05.00 to 04.07.00
In Defence	ITV	Mon	21.00	26.06.00 to 17.07.00
Hope & Glory (2)	BBC1	Tues	21.30	27.06.00 to 16.07.00
Border Café	BBC1	Sun	21.20	09.07.00 to 27.08.00
Burnside	ITV	Thurs	21.00	06.07.00 -
Playing the Field (4)	BBC1	Thurs	21.30	13.07.00 to 24.08.00
Badger (2)	BBC1	Sun/Fri	20.00/21.30	16.07.00 to 08.09.00
The Thing About Vince	ITV	Mon	21.00	24.07.00 -
Glasgow Kiss	BBC1	Tues	21.30	25.07.00 to 29.08.00
Tinsel Town	BBC2	Mon	23.20	08.08.00 -
Down to Earth	BBC1	Mon	21.00	28.08.00 -
Anchor Me	ITV	Sun/Mon	21.00	3rd & 4th 09.00
Waking the Dead	BBC1	Mon/Tues	21.30	4th & 5th 09.00
Other People's Children	BBC1	Sun	21.20	10.09.00 to 01.10.00
A Likeness in Stone	BBC1	Mon/Tues	21.30	11th & 12th 09.00
My Fragile Heart	ITV	Sun/Mon	21.00	17th & 18th 09.00
The Cops (3)	BBC2	Mon/Tues	21.00	18th & 19th 09.00
Dirty Tricks	ITV	Sun/Mon	21.00	24th & 25th 09.00
Attachments	BBC2	Tues	21.00	26.09.00 to 31.10.00
Tough Love	ITV	Sun	21.00	1st & 8th 10.00
Without Motive	ITV	Mon/Sun	21.00	09.10.00 -
Hope & Glory (4)	BBC1	Thurs	21.30	12.10.00 -
Fat Friends	ITV	Thurs	21.00	12.10.00 -
North Square	Channel 4	Wed	21.00	18.10.00 to 22.11.00
The Sins	BBC1	Tues	21.10	24.10.00 to 05.12.00

APPENDIX B

BROADCAST DATA AND CREDITS FOR CASE STUDIES

Chapter One

Butterfly Collectors

A Granada production for ITV.
First transmission: broadcast as two episodes on Monday/Tuesday 19th and 20th April 1999, from 9pm – 10.30pm.

Principal Cast

John McKeown	Pete Postlethwaite
Sandra Hollins	Alison Newman
Dex Lister	Jamie Draven
Mark Lister	Thomas Aston
Sally Lister	Ruth Harrop
Billy Johnson	Ben Crompton
Maureen	Crissy Rock
Rachel Garratt	Rachel Davies

Production Team

Writer	Paul Abbott
Director	Jean Stewart
Producer	Hilary Bevan-Jones
Executive Producers	Susan Hogg, Simon Lewis
Production Designer	Adrian Smith
Music Composers	Philip Appleby, Jocelyn Pook

Chapter Three

Warriors

BBC Films in association with Deep Indigo, for BBC2.
First transmission: broadcast as two episodes on Saturday/Sunday 20th & 21st November 1999, 9pm – 10.30/11pm.

Principal Cast

Lt John Feeley	Ioan Gruffudd
Private Peter Skeet	Darren Morfitt
Lt Neil Loughrey	Damien Lewis
Jonathan Engel	Ifan Meredith
Minko	Sheyla Shehovich
Emma	Jodhi May
Sgt Andre Sochanik	Cal Macaninch
Captain Richard Gurney	Tom Ward
Almira Zec	Branka Katic
Private Tommo Redmond	Steve Chaplin
Private Alan James	Matthew MacFadyen
Aida	Jasmina Syercic

Production Team

Writer & Director	Peter Kosminsky
Producer	Nigel Stafford-Clark
Exec producers	David M Thompson, Gareth Neame
Executive Producer	Jane Tranter
Editor	Chris Ridsdale
Production designer	Phil Robertson
Director of photography	Richard Greatrex
Music composed/conducted	Debbie Wiseman

Chapter Five

Vanity Fair

A BBC production in association with A & E network, for BBC1.
First transmission: broadcast weekly in six episodes, from Sunday 1st November to Sunday 6th December 1998, at 9pm or 9.30pm.

Principal Cast

Becky Sharp	Natasha Little
Amelia Sedley	Frances Grey
Mrs Sedley	Michelle Dotrice
Jos Sedley	Jeremy Swift
Mr Sedley	David Ross
George Osborne	Tom Ward
Mr John Osborne	Tim Woodward
Jane Osborne	Abigail Thaw
William Dobbin	Philip Glenister
Sir Pitt Crawley	David Bradley
Mr Pitt Crawley	Anton Lesser
Bute Crawley	Stephen Frost
Mrs Bute Crawley	Janine Duvitski
Rawdon Crawley	Nathaniel Parker
Miss Briggs	Janet Dale
Mrs O'Dowd	Frances Tomelly
Major O'Dowd	Mark Lambert

Production Team

Screenplay	Andrew Davies
From the novel by	William Makepeace Thackeray
Director	Marc Munden
Producer	Gillian McNeill
Executive producers	Suzan Harrison, Michael Wearing
Production design	Malcolm Thornton
Costume design	Rosalind Ebbutt
Script editor	Helen Crawley
Director of photography	Oliver Curtis
Composer	Murray Gold
Film editor	Bill Diver

Our Mutual Friend

A BBC Production for BBC2 in association with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation
First transmission: broadcast in four weekly episodes from Monday 9th March 1998 to 30th March 1998, at 9pm.

Principal Cast

Eugene Wrayburn	Paul McGann
Lizzie Hexam	Keeley Hawes
Gaffer Hexam	David Schofield
Rogue Riderhood	David Bradley
Mortimer Lightwood	Dominic Mafham
Sophronia Lammie	Doon Mackichan
Alfred Lammie	Anthony Calf
John Rokesmith/Harman	Steven Mackintosh
Mr Boffin	Peter Vaughan
Mrs Boffin	Pam Ferris
Bella Wilfer	Anna Friel
Mr Wilfer	Peter Wright
Silas Wegg	Kenneth Cranham
Mr Venus	Timothy Spall
Mr Veneering	Michael Culkin
Mrs Veneering	Rose English
Pleasant Riderhood	Rachel Power
Lady Tippins	Margaret Tyzack
Jenny Wren	Katy Murphy
Mr Dolls	Willie Ross
Sloppy	Martin Hancock
Charley Hexam	Paul Bailey
Mr Bradley Headstone	David Morrisey
Mr Tremlow	Robert Lang

Production Team

Screenplay	Sandy Welch
From the novel by	Charles Dickens
Director	Julian Farino
Producer	Catherine Wearing
Executive Producers	Phillipa Giles, Michael Wearing
Music composed by:	Adrian Johnston
Director of photography	David Odd
Film Editor	Frances Parker
Costume Designer	Mike O'Neill
Production Designer	Malcolm Thornton

Chapter Six

Nature Boy

A BBC production for BBC2.
First transmission: broadcast in six weekly episodes from Monday 14th February to 6th March, 2000, at 9pm.

Principal Cast

David Wilton	Lee Ingleby
Young David	Sean Mackie
Steve Wilton	Paul McGann
Anna Wilton	Moya Brady
Jenny Macalister	Joanne Froggatt
Anne-Marie	Victoria Binns
Darren	Mark Dixon
Martha Tyler	Lesley Sharp
Miles Tyler	Samuel Sackville
Tom Tyler	Andrew Woodall
Ted/Undersheriff	Richard Ridings

Production team

Writer	Bryan Elsley
Director	Joe Wright
Producer	Catherine Wearing
Executive producers	Hilary Salmon, Michael Wearing
Production designer	Sarah Greenwood
Director of photography	David Higgs
Composer	Simon Fisher Turner
Signature tune	Beth Orton

The Last Train

A Granada Production for ITV.
First transmission: broadcast in six episodes from Wednesday 7th April to 6th May 1999, at 9/9.45pm.

Principal Cast

Harriet Ambrose	Nicola Walter

The Last Train (cont'd)

Roe Germaine	Zoe Telford
Mick Sizer	Treva Etienne
Ian Hart	Christopher Fulford
Colin Wallis	Steve Huison
Jean Wilson	Janet Dale
Austin Danforth	James Hazeldine
Jandra Nixon	Amita Dhiri
Anita Nixon	Dinita Gohil
Leo Nixon	Sacha Dhawan
Jonathan Geddes	Ralph Brown
Hild	Caroline Carver

Production Team

Writer	Matthew Graham
Director	Stuart Orme
Producer	Sita Williams
Executive producers	Susan Hogg, Simon Lewis
Editor	Edward Mansell
Music	Christopher Gunning
Production Design	Stephen Fineren

Births, Marriages, Deaths ...

A Tiger Aspect Production for BBC2
First transmission: broadcast in four episodes from Mon 22nd February to 15th March 1999, at 9pm.

Principal Cast

Alan	Ray Winstone
Alex	Maggie O'Neill
Terry	Mark Strong
Pat	Michelle Fairley
Graham	Phil Davis
Molly	Tessa Peake-Jones

Production Team

Writer	Tony Grounds
Director	Adrian Shergold
Producer	Greg Brenman

Births, Marriages, Deaths (cont'd)

Executive producers	Charles Brand (for Tiger Aspect), Tessa Ross (for BBC).
Production designers	David Roger, Candida Otton
Director of photography	Daf Hobson
Script editor	Roanna Benn
Editor	John Stothart
Music	Nick Bicât